





FUR SIGN

By Hal G. Evarts

THE CROSS PULL

THE YELLOW HORDE

THE PASSING OF THE OLD WEST

THE BALD FACE: AND OTHER
ANIMAL STORIES

THE SETTLING OF THE SAGE
FUR SIGN



THIS STRETCH OF THE CLEARWATER WAS A VERITABLE MUSKRAT PARADISE. *Frontispiece.* See page 77.

FUR SIGN

By
HAL G. EVARTS

WITH ILLUSTRATIONS BY
LYNN BOGUE HUNT



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I

THE fire had settled to a bed of darkening embers, but an occasional curling breeze stole across the forest floor and fanned it to a mass of glowing coals topped by a fitful blaze that cast grotesque shadows on the trees. Two forms showed lumpily beneath the canvas tarp of a bed roll spread near the night fire. A gripping chill tightened down as the fire died out. One of the shapes stirred uneasily in the blankets and resolved itself into a boy, his head propped on one arm as he peered into the black shadows under the trees. An Airedale lifted his head from the edge of the bed tarp, thumped his bobbed tail drowsily and resumed his nap.

“You asleep, Buckskin?” the boy whispered.

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A second boy thrust his head from the blankets.

"No; not quite," he answered. "You notice it's getting cold, Rawhide?"

"Sort of," Rawhide confessed. "Who'd have guessed at the amount of wood it takes to keep a fire all night?"

This was the first night out and the newness of it all — the glamor of a dream transformed to reality, an outfit bought and paid for, the prospect of a full year stretching ahead — all this was not conducive to peaceful slumber. Buckskin slept at last but Rawhide gazed wide-eyed into the night. A great horned owl hooted twice from a timbered slope and a loon sent up its demented scream from a near-by lake. There were occasional dull thuds in the timber as ripe walnuts, loosened by the frost, dropped to the ground with a pulpy smash of rotting hulls.

Three months before the boy had not been known as Rawhide, but as Bob Tanner, who in all his sixteen years had never been beyond earshot of the throbbing rumble of congested

city traffic, the clatter of surface cars and the rattling clang of elevated trains. None had known him as Rawhide, the free lance of the open, for it was only on those nights when the stale air of poorly ventilated rooms rendered him sleepless that his mind had floated afield. Then he had straddled a horse and careened across the prairies, paddled a canoe through the watery highways of the wilderness and piloted it through frothing rapids or packed bales of rare furs from the winter woods. But when the gray city mornings had come around after these restless nights, he had been mere Bob Tanner of the tenements, with his stoop and his contracted chest gained from toiling long hours over an acid vat in order to contribute his bit toward the support of the overlarge family whose squalid quarters he shared, relatives of the mother he could not remember.

Rawhide nestled closer in his blankets, exulting in the thought that there would be no more of those city mornings, after nights of fancy, when he should face the cold reality of Bob Tanner's daily lot. Now he was Rawhide in

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fact as well as fancy, a rover of the wilderness. Soon he would roll from his blankets in the crisp cool of an autumn dawn, breakfast and pack for a long day on the trail. Sleep claimed him with this last comforting thought.

The restless prowling of the Airedale roused him with the first streak of rose in the east. There was a heavy white frost on the grass. A dozen crows shattered the quiet of the early morning as Rawhide drew on his clothes. He reached beneath the bed tarp and produced a handful of shavings and a few dry sticks stored there the previous evening to facilitate the kindling of the morning cook-fire in case of unexpected storms during the night. Buckskin repaired to a near-by spring for water.

Both boys splashed faces and hands in a pan of the icy spring water before setting about the preparation of the morning meal. Rawhide stirred up a stiff batter of flour and water, salt and baking powder, then balanced a frying-pan on the fire. A bucket of coffee simmered and at last foamed to a boil as the flames

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curled round the little tin pail. Rawhide dropped a lump of lard in the frying-pan. When the grease had melted and the bottom of the skillet was smoking hot, he poured in a portion of the flapjack batter. Small flecks of white wood ash curled over the edge of the skillet and settled on the fresh dough but turned black as they absorbed the moisture. The top of the flapjack was liberally sprinkled with ashes.

“She’s ready to turn,” Rawhide pronounced.

He shook the skillet gently to loosen the flapjack, and with a little forward and upward flip of his wrist the skillet-bread was propelled a few inches above the pan, turned in mid-air and settled back with a hiss on the uncooked side.

Buckskin eyed the crisp brown side now exposed to view and smacked his lips hungrily.

“You’re the best camp cook ever,” he stated positively.

Rawhide lifted his head and rubbed his streaming eyes.

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“Don’t make any difference what side of the fire you move to,” he said. “The wind veers round to follow you and blow smoke in your eyes. But I expect this fryin’-pan bread will go pretty good—aside from a handful of ashes.”

The flapjack was halved and the two adventurers sat cross-legged on the ground, each washing down his portion with steaming coffee while a second sheet of batter sizzled in the skillet. The Airedale rested with his head flat between his paws and eyed the banqueters wistfully. Whenever he caught the eye of either boy he raised his head and jerked his stumped tail in supplication. He gave one soft bark to gain their attention.

“Your turn will come, Battler,” Rawhide announced. “I’ll spoil one likely and that will go to you.”

Some of the flapjacks were scorched on one side. All were well seasoned with wood ashes and once Rawhide misgauged his toss and caught the flapjack on edge on its return to the frying-pan. This lumpy ruin was tossed

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to Battler and the Airedale bolted the morsel with evident relish.

“ I’ll go run in the horse herd while you get ready to pack,” Buckskin volunteered, when the dishes had been washed.

Rawhide strapped the bed roll and gathered all loose articles into compact bundles. He had finished by the time Buckskin returned with a little bay horse.

The harness consisted of a band that circled the pony’s body behind the shoulders, while a second, heavily padded, served as a breast strap and was buckled to the first on either side. The tips of two long slender poles were thrust through loops fashioned in the sides of the backstrap and lashed firmly in place, so that the entire pull would be taken up by the padded strap that crossed the breast.

An hour later a strange cavalcade filed from the timber and struck out across the rolling grasslands of the Flint Hills. Rawhide chose the route and held the lead rope of Warrior, the little bay horse. Warrior was burdened with perhaps the first Indian litter that had

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traversed the Flint Hills in five decades. The ends of the poles trailed well out behind him and upon this primitive but serviceable conveyance the bulk of the outfit was firmly lashed.

Buckskin followed, leading Battler, and the Airedale was similarly burdened by a tiny litter, to his very evident disgust. This was but his second day in the capacity of a beast of burden, and if left to follow his own preferences he would have elected to range far to either side and hunt en route. Rawhide shouldered a shotgun as he led the way while Buckskin carried a twenty-two rifle.

The course of this strange cavalcade led down-country between two streams, the north and south forks of the Clearwater. Off to the right the Flint Hills dipped away to the bottom of the North Fork. Hills rose tier upon tier on the far side of the South Fork, their slopes clothed with hardwood and showing now in a whirl of flaming color where autumn frost had plied its magic paintbrush and splashed the landscape with a thousand blazing hues.

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The Forks converged three miles below and a patch of heavy timber marked the flat at the confluence. Beyond the Forks the bottoms widened out into hay meadows that shot their tongues back into the breaks of the Flint Hills flanking the Clearwater. The boys hastened down the last grassy slope and struck the timber at the Forks, the prospective site of their winter trapping camp.

Before noon the camp was pitched. A tent eight feet by ten stood under a giant elm midway between the two streams, the bed roll spread in one corner and the slender stock of utensils and supplies stored inside. The two adventurers viewed their work with pride, the thrill of ownership swelling high within them.

"We'd better start stringing out our traps," Buckskin suggested. "The sooner we begin catching fur, the more money we'll have in the spring."

Rawhide dumped ten small steel traps from a burlap sack. Their hopes for the future centered around those little steel contrivances.

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Battler left off tunneling under a down-log and followed them as they set off through the timber.

“Where will we make the first set?” Buckskin inquired.

“We’ll have to locate fur sign first,” Rawhide stated. “We’ll likely find some soon. Then we’ll make a set.”

Their speech savored of the jargon of the trap line, yet neither boy had ever before set a trap. The partners were up against the first real trial of their venture.

“Muskrats live in the water,” Buckskin asserted. “It might be a good plan to follow the creek.”

Two hours later they returned to camp and the traps were all set. Three had been placed on the crest of the creek bank at points where claw marks testified that rats used this route of exit from their watery abode. Buckskin had killed a cottontail, and the head and entrails had been suspended from a low-hanging limb and a trap set on the ground some two feet below. The rest of the traps had been

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placed in hollow trees and covered lightly with wood rot.

That night the partners sat on either side of a fire that blazed before the tent. The arms of both boys were stained a deep brown to the elbows but three bushels of hulled walnuts, spread on the ground to dry, explained this strange discoloration. All through the afternoon they had been engaged in pounding the hulls from fallen nuts and packing them into camp.

"They're worth a dollar a bushel," Rawhide commented. "Maybe more. We ought to gather twenty bushels within walking range of camp. That will buy our grub for the next two months."

"I wonder if there's anything in the traps," Buckskin said, after a long silence. "We ought to make a good catch of fur to-night. I like it out here fine — and I hope we can make it through and not have to go back."

For Buckskin too was a product of the tenements. Not long since he had been Wallace Porter, ringleader of a corner gang and

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known as Wally to his intimates. The same welfare society had sent the two waifs into the country for a month and they had worked for their board on adjoining farms. Together they had planned to stay on after the month was up. They had worked on through the summer and the little money they had earned had sufficed to buy the outfit. Warrior was an old pony and had been bought for a ten-dollar bill. The tent, the pump gun, rifle and utensils had been picked up here and there at figures greatly reduced from their original cost. There was sufficient food supply for a month and a cash surplus of two dollars and a dime in camp.

“We won’t go back,” Rawhide asserted sturdily. “We’ll manage to weather it through some way or another.”

Battler suddenly lifted his head from between his paws and sniffed the wind. A curling tongue of wood smoke assailed his nostrils and he sneezed, then rose and proceeded to the edge of the firelit space and gazed off into the black shadows under the trees. The hackle



BATTLER ROSE AND PROCEEDED TO THE EDGE OF THE
FIRELIT SPACE. *Page 14.*

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fur bristled into a roach along his spine and a rumble sounded deep in his throat but was suppressed. It was not the Airedale's way to rage hysterically except at the finish of a hunt. He was a quiet, businesslike dog, a silent trailer, and when he worked out a track he made no sound to warn the intended prey of his approach till within striking distance; then he loosed his fighting bellow and rushed his quarry. When Battler hunted, there was no such ringing music as filled the night when a baying hound ran a track in the hills. Battler disappeared in the night and a moment thereafter his savage snarls issued from the timber. A man's voice angrily ordered him off. This startled both boys and a vague suspicion of the stranger crept into their minds. Why this silent approach, unless with the purpose of spying on their camp?

"You Battler! Come here!" Buckskin commanded. "Get on in here! You!"

They stepped outside the circle of light cast by the fire, and after their pupils became readjusted to the darkness they could make out

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the form of a man a few yards away through the trees.

“Call off this dog,” he ordered. “He gave me a start, pouncing out on me thataway.”

Battler withdrew under the combined urging of both boys but it was evident that this retreat was against the Airedale’s will and he eyed the stranger with thinly veiled hostility when he came to the fire.

“I wore rubber boots so’s I could wade across to your camp,” the man volunteered, as he sat on a down-log and held out his hands toward the heat of the fire. “Them rubber soles don’t give off much noise so I guess the dog didn’t hear me till I was coming up the near bank of the creek.”

He tapped one knee to indicate the hip boots with which he was shod.

“My name is Reese Neil,” he went on. “I’m camped down below. You’re the boys Snyder and Brown was telling me about, likely — the fellows they give permission to trap on their leases.”

Rawhide nodded.

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"That's us," he agreed.

"This is a big country through here," Neil observed. "There's room for us all. I'm trapping a little myself."

The country for twenty miles around was utilized mainly for pasture. The stockmen cut over the grassy bottoms for hay rather than rip up the scattered flats with a plow and seed them to crops. Brown had nine sections under fence, his holdings extending some four miles downstream from the forks. Snyder held a similar block stretching up country. The hills above this last lease were mostly timber holdings or Government land.

"Yes; there's plenty of room," Rawhide agreed. "There's several hundred sections of Flint Hill country to trap."

"That's what I was just going to say," Neil announced. "Our minds work the same. Snyder and Brown told me they'd give you the right to trap on their leases and that I'd better pitch camp somewheres else. I was just thinking that we all might as well get together on that. I'll trap the leases if it comes handy

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to me and you trap outside whenever the notion takes hold. That way we can any of us range the whole country. What do you say?"

Each boy found Neil's personality unprepossessing to an extreme. His stubby beard was caked with dirt, his clothing equally disreputable, and his small ferrety eyes shifted constantly as if it tired him to fix them on any one object for more than a second at a time.

"I hardly know," Rawhide hesitated. "It sounds all right and we want to play square. But of course we couldn't give you the right to trap the leases unless we'd see Brown and Snyder first. You see how it is."

"Oh, that's all right," Neil returned easily. "Neither of them cares a snap. But of course you're dead right to tell them. Always play open and square. That's my way. I'll maybe throw out a few traps up in here and then any time you see Brown or Snyder you can tell them about our arrangement."

"No, I expect we'd better let things rest as they are," Buckskin decided. "At least till after we see Mr. Snyder. I worked on his

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home place during the summer and know him right well. Whatever he says goes with me. But up till then you'd better not trap on the leases."

Neil nodded, apparently undisturbed by this flat refusal.

"I hear talk that you all are trapping to make a stake to go to Wyoming and homestead," he said.

"Maybe," Rawhide confessed. "But not for a year or two yet. That country is a long way from here and we may never get started."

"No reason," Neil stated. "There's land a-plenty out there. But I'd head out pretty soon before the best is picked over. I've got relatives out around Two Buttes. I'm headed for there myself before long."

For an hour he entertained them with tales of the trap line and of hunts for big game in the western hills. Their original suspicions were lulled and forgotten under the magic interest he wove around the country both longed to see. At last Neil rose and stretched.

"I'm camped two mile below Brown's line

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fence, south side of the creek," he said. "Drop down and pay me a visit."

After his departure they sat and gazed into the embers of the dying fire.

"Maybe he isn't so bad," Buckskin remarked after a while.

"No. But his boots were dry when he came to the fire," Rawhide stated. "He said he'd just waded out of the creek. He must have been standing this side of it for ten minutes, at least, or the water would have showed on his boots."

"Then he lied," Buckskin said. "He was trying to hang round and get a line on our camp. But it don't matter much. He can't trap the leases without we say the word."

The boys sought their bed roll and a vast content filled their souls. They had planned big plans for the future and these centered round the ten traps strung out through the timber. Their hopes might have run less high if they had realized that they had made the mistakes common to beginners; that their trap line as now set would not be apt to yield one catch

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in a month. But the wonder of this first night in camp was not clouded by knowledge of these flaws in their reckoning.

The shadows of the fire flickered across the walls of the tent. It was a good old world. They were on their own, and out of all humanity there was not one single soul to waste more than a casual thought as to their whereabouts or to feel one pang of regret if they should never again return to the city slum from which they sprang. It was up to them. Battler bedded down in the door of the tent as the fire died down, and they slept to dream of rich harvests of fur on the morrow.

II

OLD Jack Kennedy rode through the north pasture and leaned from his saddle to inspect some strange marks. His mind flashed back nearly a half century into the past to a time when similar marks would have given rise to serious reflections.

“Looks for all the world like the drag of an Indian litter,” he told the horse. “But I reckon not.”

He followed the trail to a bare spot and dismounted to study the sign. The hoofprints of a horse showed between the marks of dragging poles.

“Now there’s been some sort of a gypsy outfit trailing through here for a fact,” he said. “That’s the first time I’ve seen the marks of a litter drag in many a moon—close onto forty years.”

He swung to the saddle and followed the

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trail out of sheer curiosity. It led to the little tent pitched at the forks of the Clearwater. The Airedale was off on a hunt and the two boys had no warning of his approach till a voice hailed them from outside.

They emerged from the tent to find a stranger sitting his horse in their dooryard. He seemed the incarnation of the great outdoors as Rawhide had pictured it. He wore a battered slouch hat, a leather vest, and overalls with the legs tucked into high-heeled riding boots. The drooping white mustache showed in marked relief against the weathered mahogany background of his face.

Rawhide had read that distances were far in the wilderness, that the traveler was ever hungry. Custom demanded that the wayfaring stranger should be fed. That was the courtesy of the open as Rawhide understood it.

“Get down, stranger,” he said. “Get down and eat. I’ll start cooking up a bite.”

The maze of sun wrinkles deepened round Kennedy’s keen old blue eyes but he repressed the smile that struggled to break through.

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“Don’t bother, boys,” he said. “I’ve fed. But I’ll step off and visit round for a spell. It appears likely we’re going to be neighbors for the winter. I’m feeding stock and ridin’ fence for Snyder and Brown. They was telling me a pair of trappers was going to work the Forks. My shack is up the North Fork about four mile.”

Rawhide essayed introductions.

“My name is Rawhide,” he volunteered. “And my friend here goes by the name of Buckskin. We’re sure glad to have you drop in.”

The sun wrinkles deepened again at these fanciful titles but the old man answered gravely enough.

“And mine is Kennedy,” he informed. “I’m right glad to have you folks for neighbors. We’ll have to visit back and forth.”

He sat on a down-log near the tent and fired up his pipe. Battler came into camp and sniffed the newcomer critically, then rested his jaws on the stranger’s knee and looked up into his face as Kennedy scratched his head.

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“How’s the luck?” Kennedy queried. “I expect you’re catching fur a-plenty.”

“Not any great quantity,” Rawhide confessed. “Fur seems rather scarce.”

“Why, man, this country is just all littered up with fur sign,” Kennedy objected. “I’ve been noticing. Fur has been way down for the last few seasons and the Forks haven’t been trapped in two years. You ought to clean up a nice little stake this winter.”

“Then why haven’t we made a catch in three rounds of the trap line?” Buckskin asked. “Not one single pelt.”

Kennedy failed to answer this question direct. During his ride through the timbered flat he had discovered two traps set in hollow trees, another on the bare earth of the creek bank. He rambled on about a variety of subjects and drew the partners out to talk about themselves. Kennedy sensed what this venture meant to these two waifs without home or parents. He knew, too, that if left to their own devices they could not make enough to keep grub in camp even in a land where fur

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was plentiful. Those trap sets had branded them as raw novices. He could start them right if they would heed his suggestions. Kennedy rose and knocked the ashes from his pipe.

“I’ll be sauntering on back,” he said. “I’ve been pinching toes and stretching pelts for the best part of fifty years. If there’s anything I can tell you don’t hesitate to ask. Now if you find a few spare hours you might drop round and look my shack over some time to-morrow.”

Battler followed Kennedy’s horse a few hundred yards through the timber and stood looking after him. A few nights past he had also followed Reese Neil when he departed from camp, but on that occasion the Airedale had kept his distance from the man, plainly evidencing his dislike by his stiff, aloof manner and the half-raised hackle fur on the point of his shoulders.

“You can always count on an Airedale’s judgment,” Rawhide asserted. “He likes Kennedy fine but he didn’t care much for Reese Neil.”

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“Then he and I are agreed,” Buckskin commented. “Neither did I.”

The boys showed up at Kennedy's cabin soon after breakfast on the following day. This was conclusive evidence that they had accepted his proffer of friendly counsel as to the ways of the trap line.

“What about this fellow Neil?” Rawhide asked after a while. “He wants to trap the leases and let us trap outside. That way we can any of us trap where we please.”

“You can trap wherever you please right now,” Kennedy stated. “And Neil can't work the leases because Snyder and Brown won't let any one cut in on you boys unless you say the word. You'd be giving him the best end of the deal. I'd keep him off. He's got plenty of country to trap without bothering you. Then you can tell him to take all the country below Brown's line fence while you boys work from there up.”

Kennedy produced a thin, tapering board.

“This is a rat board,” he said. “If I'm going to show you the game we might as well

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start at the first. You mustn't slit fur open down the middle like you peel the hide from a cow. It's got to be cased, pulled off like you'd pull off a sock wrong side out, and stretched on a casing board. You'll need stretchers a-plenty, once you start knocking out fur. I've marked the measurements out on this pattern. That's for big rats. You'll have to make a sprinkling of boards a half inch smaller throughout."

The pattern was made from quarter-inch stuff. It was twenty inches long and six inches across at the base, tapering almost imperceptibly to a width of five and a half inches at the point where the shoulders would come. From this point the board was sloped more abruptly to a blunt rounded end for the nose of the pelt. The patterns for opossum and skunk were shaped much the same, a trifle more peaked at the noses and the measurements larger throughout, the boards being thirty inches long, eight across the base and six and a half at the shoulders. For small or medium pelts these could be scaled down a half-inch for each

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smaller hide. The stretcher for civet and mink was made in two parts; a pair of two-inch strips of thin board, each tapered very slightly on one side and rounded off at the nose. A hide cased on these could be stretched very long and almost the same width from tail to nose, a wedge inserted between the two halves of the pattern to take up the slack and to facilitate the removal of the board after the pelt had been cured.

“Now you’ll want to amplify your outfit a little,” Kennedy said. “It’s a dandy as far as it goes. But you want a hundred traps instead of ten. Then each of you can cover a separate route, once you’re lined out. Trapping is like anything else. You have to work hard at your job to make good. You’ll want a little stove in that tent. Outside cooking is all right in weather like this, or any time in a pinch, but it’s miserable business to crawl out in the morning in two foot of fresh snow and get breakfast with the water dripping down your neck and into the frying-pan, day after day. Lots of your trapping will be creek or

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marsh work, so you'll both need hip boots. I guess that will cover the layout."

"But how can we get all that with only two dollars between the pair of us?" Rawhide asked. "It just can't be done."

"Sounds sort of staggering," Kennedy admitted. "But it won't require much of an outlay. Those walnuts of yours ought nearly to cover the cost. You boys pounce onto collecting a few more bushels of nuts. I've got to make a trip to town for supplies and I'll bring a wagon down to the Forks on the way and haul the nuts into market. A little later I'll pitch a teepee down at your camp. Right now it's handy to live up here while I'm working at Snyder's hill fences. When the storms hit and the grass is snowed under, the stock will drift down below the Forks to the bottoms where we put up the hay. Then I'll have to stay down there and feed. You better take up what traps you've got out. We'll throw out a line when the time comes but the fur won't be prime for another ten days."

"Every month with an R," Rawhide said.

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“That’s what I’ve heard; and this is October. Neil came up to see us last night after you left. He’s already caught two hundred pelts.”

“Then that settles Neil’s case right off,” Kennedy stated. “Fur don’t prime up in this country till some time in November. If Neil has collected two hundred pelts up to date he’s a sooner. No wonder he wants to trap the Forks. He’s cleaned the best fur out of his own territory before it was prime and now he wants to trap yours. A sooner is always a hog. Those pelts won’t bring a third what they would if caught two weeks later on. A good trapper never works his country too close but leaves plenty of fur-critters to raise another crop for next year. We’ll keep this man Neil off the leases. Seems like I’ve cut his trail somewheres before but I can’t just recollect. There’s all kinds of trappers, the most part of them shiftless, but a sooner’s the worst of the lot.”

Just ten days later the two boys sat in the tent and waited for Kennedy to come. The air was crisp outside but the heat of the stove

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kept the tent snug and warm. The stove was a simple contrivance of sheet steel with no floor, the bare earth forming the bottom of the fire box. It was so constructed that the heat was sucked back around the oven. The outfit stood complete and Rawhide sighed with satisfaction as he viewed it. A hundred traps hung on pegs driven into the trunk of the big elm. A solid homemade grub chest was generously stocked with food. There were two pairs of hip boots; two belt axes hung from the tent pole and the camp was well stocked with homemade furniture; a table with split poles for a top, three stools made by sawing cross-sections from a ten-inch log and nailing a square board on one end; and a log edging on the ground in one corner of the tent to serve as a bunk, this filled with ten inches of hay on which to spread the bed roll. Fifty casing boards of all sizes and patterns were piled against a tree. A dozen boxes of shotgun shells and a thousand rounds of ammunition for the little rifle were stored in the grub chest, for Kennedy had impressed upon them that both must learn to

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shoot and so live largely "off the country" by keeping the camp well supplied with meat. Their combined assets after marketing the walnuts had totalled but twenty-four dollars and the expenditures had exceeded this amount. They were indebted to Jack Kennedy to the sum of eight dollars.

When Kennedy rode up to camp he brought his own boots in a sack lashed on behind his saddle. In addition he had brought two more canvas grain bags.

"I fashioned you a pair of trapping sacks," he announced. "Every trapper ought to tote a pack sack to carry his stuff so his hands won't be eternally full of something or other. Each of you take ten traps and we'll make a start. One of you bring that duck Rawhide killed last night."

The canvas sacks had been cut down to a trifle less than half-length, leaving a two-inch strip of canvas on each side to serve as straps and fashioned into shoulder loops. The boys loaded up, slipped their arms through the loops and followed Kennedy as he headed for the

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North Fork and waded out into the stream. Within a few yards of the start Kennedy halted and indicated a point at the water line under an overhanging grassy bank studded with clumps of willows. There was a slight excavation at the water's edge and the roots of slough grass and willows were exposed.

“That's where rats have been scratching,” he said. “They come up here and scratch, sitting half in the water while they clip off a root or two. They've been feeding for ten feet either way from here, but that hollow shows more use than the rest. Here's where we make the first set.”

He cut a smooth willow sapling an inch through at the butt and with the first branches cropping out midway of its length. He set the trap on a flat bed of mud under three inches of water, shoved the butt of the willow through the ring of the trap chain and pushed it well home in the bank a few inches under the water line. The branches trailed out in the current and were forced under water.

“Now that acts as a slide pole,” he said.

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“It’s the most effective drown-set I know. The rat will make for deep water when the trap grips his foot. The ring slides down the pole till the branches snub it short. That keeps the rat from getting out on the bank and in five minutes he’s drowned. A muskrat will foot himself nine times out of ten if left where he can get up on the bank. And this slide pole blends in with the other willows dragging out in the stream and leaves no sign to help fur thieves locate your sets. Now you boys try and find rat sign and make sets yourselves.”

A thicket of willows grew on the opposite shore of the creek some fifty yards farther upstream. The water line was honeycombed with rat workings and the boys located the spot.

“Good enough,” said Kennedy. “Might as well make two sets along here. The sign shows a whole colony of rats are using this willow-brush patch.”

Rawhide cut a slide pole and was first to complete his set.

“Only one thing wrong,” Kennedy said.

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“The rat will come to the trap from the water, not down the bank. Always turn your trap with the free jaw toward the side where your catch will come in. Your trap’s turned wrong side, with the dog toward the creek. If a rat stepped in from the side of the pinioned jaw it’s likely the dog would throw his foot clear of the trap as it flipped up when the spring was released.”

Kennedy peered down into the clear water of the stream and examined the bank. He pointed to the mouth of a hole that showed some eight inches under the water.

“Likely that’s the mouth of the den,” he explained. “Bank rats tunnel up from below water line. By prospecting those holes with a willow you can tell whether they go clear back or are only false leads.”

He cut a slender willow wand and inserted the end in the hole. The pliable rod followed the curves of the tunnel and was easily thrust into the bank for five feet.

“That’s the entrance,” Kennedy decided. “Buckskin, you smack a trap in that hole.”

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After a little study it was easy to locate rat sign, even to tell with fair accuracy whether or not it was fresh. Each boy made another set within the next hundred yards. Then Kennedy pointed to a steep bank beneath the roots of a mighty elm. A fringe of lacy rootlets lapped the water and acted as a screen to conceal a long narrow shelf under the bank.

"There's a little shelf runs along behind those roots," Kennedy said. "A sure-fire rat set, and any other fur that swims down the creek is pretty apt to follow through it. There's about three inches of water laps over the shelf. Plant a trap back in there."

Round the next bend a partly submerged down-log slanted out of the water.

"Notice that rats have been using that log," Kennedy pointed out. "A mink or a coon will walk out on it, too, for a rest. We'll make a new kind of a set."

He took Rawhide's hand-ax and chopped a notch in the log a few inches below water line, motioning the boys back beyond reach of the spray. This made a flat bed for the trap and

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he wired the trap chain to an outcropping snag well under water.

There was a flat on the north shore of the stream. This pinched out to a narrow bench under the higher bank and a dimly defined trail threaded this shelf and rounded the roots of a giant cottonwood tree.

“Most fur, even ’possum and such, follow the streams even though they seldom take to the water themselves,” Kennedy informed the boys. “They’ll saunter along and at some points there’s natural obstacles that crowd them into passing over the same route, like right here. We’ll throw out a bait set now. Let’s have that duck.”

He placed a chunk of log parallel to one of the outcropping roots and roofed this lane over with slabs of bark from a down-log. The entrails of the duck were placed in the bait pen and the rear end solidly blocked. A section of three-inch stick was wedged across the mouth of the pen and the trap set just behind it so that the animal that entered must step over the stick and place a foot on the trap pan. The

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chain was wired to the tip end of a ten-foot pole. This would serve as a drag and yet have sufficient spring to prevent a trapped fur bearer from getting a solid pull in his struggles to free himself from the trap. Kennedy plucked the soft down from the breast of the duck and covered the trap to a depth of two inches. The stick at the fore end of the pen prevented the feathers from blowing away. He pulled the stiff wing feathers and scattered them near the spot.

“The more feathers the better,” he stated. “Even if a critter is up-wind and don’t scent the bait he may see the feathers floating about and it appears like something has made a kill down here under the bank. He’ll wander down to have a look and we’ll pinch his toes. There’s all kinds of bait sets, but for this country the feather set is by all odds the best. Duck or fish bait will draw any fur that ranges through here. The feathers make soft covering and won’t clog the trap like wood rot or trash often does.”

As they proceeded Kennedy explained that

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a hollow down-log made an ideal bait pen if dragged to the edge of the stream. Fur bearers were prone to investigate hollow logs along their routes for dormant insects, nests of mice or for stray cottontails that might have sought shelter inside. A fish or a duck's head back in the hollow and a few feathers floating around the mouth would be certain to challenge the interest of any meat-eater passing that way.

A windfall log spanned the creek at one point and this formed a natural crossing for the fur folk. Kennedy chopped a notch in which to bed the trap and covered it with thin strips of the fibrous inner bark of a dead cottonwood.

Some quarter of a mile above camp a huge log jam was piled at a bend in the creek. The mud flat at its edge was littered with tracks.

"You want to make a bait set at every log jam on the creek," Kennedy informed. "Fur critters just can't pass one up without investigating a bit. Notice how this flat is tracked up."

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He pointed to a track that appeared to be the print of a baby's hand.

"That's a coon track, and a big one, too. This line of tracks looks a trifle similar, only more straggling, the toes spread well apart sort of star shaped and more like bird claws. That's the trail of a 'possum. A smashing big skunk has been down for a drink. Notice his oblong pads, pinching off rounded at the heel, and his long claws overreaching in front. This track is exactly the same, only about one-third the size. That's a civet. These trails that look like they might be made by frogs were left by muskrats out prowling round in the mud. See where their tails dragged now and then. Here's mink track, but it's old. Their toe prints show up like a cat animal's, only spread farther apart. You want to learn every track in the hills and right here's a good place to begin. Every kind of fur in the woods has visited this log jam in the last couple of weeks."

The bait set at this point took the last of the traps.

"That'll be all for to-day," Kennedy stated.

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“ I’ve showed you some of the best kind of sets and now you’ll have to work things out for yourselves. You’ll catch fur to-night and to-morrow I’ll show you how to skin out and handle your catch. If a hide is worth trapping at all it deserves a good job of handling. Every scrap of fat must come off. If you leave it on it grease-burns the pelt. Even if they don’t heat, a bunch of fat hides won’t bring much over half on the market as what they would if they’d been clean-fleshed on the start.”

That night seemed overlong and both boys waked many times and wondered how soon the dawn would come. They were out with the first streak of light and elected to run the trap line before breakfasting.

Rawhide stooped to examine the first set. The light was dim but sufficient to enable him to determine that the trap was gone from its bed.

“ It’s gone,” he said. “ I can’t see it anywhere.”

Buckskin seized the slide pole and lifted the

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submerged branches from the water. The trap chain hung straight down with a weight at the end of it. There would be many thrills in the life of each boy but few that could equal the tingle of joy that flooded their souls at lifting that first drowned muskrat from the Clear-water.

The trap was reset and they waded on to the willow thicket above. Rawhide's set and the trap in the under-water hole each held a rat. The third was unsprung.

"We've made a bigger catch than I'd expected even if we don't get another rat," Buckskin exulted. "This is catching fur right!"

There was no fur in the next few sets before reaching the watery shelf behind the lacy root-lets under the elm. This trap, too, was gone.

"Another rat," Rawhide stated as he lifted the slide pole and caught the chain.

"That's no rat!" Buckskin exclaimed. "It's got a bushy tail. It's a squirrel."

Rawhide nearly dropped his catch back into the stream as he discovered its species.

"Mink!" he said. "That's what it is."

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That hide is worth four or five rats. If this keeps up we'll have all the fur in the country in the first day's catch."

The set on the partially submerged log was untouched and the bait trap under the roots of the big cottonwood was also undisturbed. Another rat had been added to the load in the pack sacks when they reached the down-log spanning the creek. A big opossum prowled back and forth on the log, his foot fast in the trap. One more rat was the yield of the two traps between that point and the log jam. Buckskin gripped his friend's arm as they neared this last set.

"What's that?" he demanded.

Some black thing moved on the bank where the bait pen had been constructed, at the edge of the log jam.

"Skunk," Rawhide announced. "We've got him. He's worth two dollars, that fellow, if he's worth a cent."

But the skunk was worth far more than that. He was a huge old boar, as black as a crow except for a forked spot of white on his head.

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“A split-cap,” Buckskin said as they gazed at the prize. “A black skunk, sure enough!”

A shot from the twenty-two finished the skunk. An hour later the boys were back in camp. A mink, a 'possum, a skunk and six rats were arranged in a row on a down-log and the boys waited for Kennedy to come and show them how to handle their catch.

III

RAWHIDE crouched in a blind fashioned in the tall grass that flanked the pond, waiting for the first morning light. The whirl of unseen pinions sounded all about him, the soft wing whistles of slow-flying ducks and the hissing screech of speedsters hurtling by. A sheet of water stretched away for a hundred yards and a dozen decoys bobbed on the surface of the pond some little distance from his blind. He gripped the shotgun as a flock of redheads tumbled into the water beyond the decoys.

The sky turned rose in the east and he saw a dark moving streak against its glow as a flock of mallards headed for the big marsh a mile farther down the stream. The pond was a half-mile below camp and the bottoms had widened out, with flat hay meadows extending back into the narrow breaks between outcropping spurs of the Flint Hills. The stream be-

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low the Forks flowed smoothly between grassy shores free of timber except for numerous thickets of willow. The shadows lifted and Rawhide could see the dark shapes that were mounds of hay in Brown's stack-yards. Ducks streaked in all directions across the sky and a squadron of great gray geese honked overhead. The big flight of the season was on.

The boy ducked convulsively as fifty blue-bills hurtled just above the grass tops all about his head and were gone before he could shoot. A dark line of redheads swept over the pond, wheeled into the wind with set wings and slanted down for the decoys. He fired at the thickest mass of birds and the flock held straight on at the jarring report. He shot twice again as they left. One bird sagged under the rest, gave up the struggle and struck the water with a splash on the far side of the pond. Two drakes floated dead just outside the decoys.

He crammed more shells into the magazine as a cloud of ducks wheeled over the pond, swung away and circled again. These acted

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in an entirely different manner from the red-heads. At the first report they scattered and climbed, some with wings spread flat against the wind to retard their advance toward the blind. He fired three more shots without making a kill.

Rawhide had yet to learn that different species of ducks adopt various tactics; that canvasbacks, bluebills and redheads will seldom scatter or dodge at a shot, but hold straight on their course, while mallards will scatter and climb. A compact bunch of speeding teal will disperse like a puff of smoke with a shot; and so on, all the way down through the species.

Black swarms rose from the hay land and the big marsh below. A flock screeched over the pond, circling it twice as if to diminish their speed, and headed straight for the blind. They wheeled gracefully and he fired as they made the turn. The bottom seemed to drop from the flock and as the heavy bodies splashed on the surface he poured four shots after the vanishing birds. There were four canvasbacks down on the pond, three from the first lucky

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shot on the turn and but one lone duck brought to bag by the other four shots. Rawhide fired another dozen shells and dropped but three more ducks, then waded out into the pond and picked up his ten birds.

He reached camp before the fiery ball of the sun swung above the Flint Hills. Buckskin had the morning meal prepared and after breakfasting they set forth to run their separate trap lines. Kennedy had mapped out a tentative route for each of them. Rawhide's line followed the North Fork for five miles upstream, then swung away from the creek and back through the open Flint Hills to the south of it. Thus he traveled in a loop and avoided a waste of time by covering any of the same ground twice. Buckskin's line was laid out a like distance up the South Fork, his back trip also leading down through the hills between the two streams, their two routes converging a mile above camp at the far edge of the timbered flat.

Rawhide had found fewer rat signs as the timber thickened up on the bank, only isolated

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colonies scattered along. He had made sets at these but for the most part he bait-trapped. Every log jam was a site for a bait pen and he had become adept in building these little structures so they blended in with surroundings. He had dragged hollow logs to the water's edge at points where broad flats pinched out to narrow shelves under the bank and so made natural leads for fur bearers to follow. At one of these points the bank was littered with mink tracks and there were fish scales padded thick in the mud. A smoothly worn hole showed in the bank two feet above water line and there was a similar entrance a foot under water. He had placed a trap in each of these, knowing the spot for a mink den. The family had long since departed on its travels and for three days the traps had remained undisturbed. But this fact had not brought discouragement, for Rawhide had already learned much of the ways of fur animals, some little from his own observations but mainly from inquiring of Kennedy. He knew that the mink was a traveler and that he fol-

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lowed a regular route. Where once he found fresh mink sign it was certain that the animal would eventually return; it might be in five days or it might be in ten, according to the length of his route, but unless picked up by a trap at some other part of his circle he would surely be back. Also mink sometimes traveled in groups and where he caught one he stood a good chance to find others fast in near-by traps. Therefore, Rawhide held high hopes regarding these mink sets a mile above camp.

His pack sack contained an opossum and two rats when he reached the spot. There were fresh mink tracks on the bank both ways from the old den and the trap was gone from the water set. Rawhide's heart beat rapidly as he lifted the sagging tip of the slide pole from the water and a sickening shock of disappointment flooded him as he found the trap empty.

There was a brown patch midway of the jaws, showing in distinct relief against the greenish secretion which the water had spread over the balance of the trap.

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“Had him for a minute, anyway,” he said. “But he pulled out of the trap.”

A rat set some twenty yards along the shore had also made a catch.

“Likely I’ve got him here,” Rawhide said as he lifted the slide pole.

This trap too was empty.

“These minks are hard to hold,” he lamented. “That’s a tough blow, having two break away.”

It did not occur to him that an animal so securely gripped as to leave a mark where its leg had worn through the greenish erosion on the metal was incapable of extracting the member without leaving evidence in the shape of a foot or at least a few severed toes.

The remaining four miles of his creek route yielded only one opossum but there was one other trap from which some fur animal had made good its escape.

“Strange how it runs like that,” Rawhide mused. “One day you’ll hold every catch, and the next day the biggest part pull out of the traps.”

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Near the upper end of his line a bait set in the end of a hollow log had made a catch. The soft dirt had been torn up for three feet in all directions by the prisoner's struggles to escape. There was a splotch of fresh blood near the shore line but this was almost obliterated by the action of water that had been splashed across it. The trap lay in the edge of the creek but the mark where the jaws had gripped the animal's leg was still evident and a few matted hairs still adhered to the metal.

"It was a big coon," Rawhide said. "And he's not been gone long. That blood is right fresh. He must have taken a dive in the creek when he broke the trap's hold. That's the reason he didn't leave a track in the mud to show where he went. He kicked about a barrel of water behind him when he landed and it nearly washed that blood off the bank."

Thus Rawhide read the signs. He was beginning to learn. But there was one prowler whose sign he failed to take into account, a creature who has no special range but whose habitat includes all countries where traps are

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set out for the fur bearers. His name is Fur Thief and his numbers are legion.

Rawhide took up the trap and deposited it with others which he carried in his pack sack for the purpose of making sets at any fresh sign along his route. He swung aside from the creek, traversed the quarter-mile strip of timber that flanked it, and came out into the grass-covered Flint Hills. There were scattered patches of trees at the heads of the gulches. These marked the sites of sidehill seeps and below them were trickling spring runs that meandered through the narrow bottoms.

Kennedy had explained that out in these hills he would find skunk dens and that all sorts of fur animals would seek the open country at night. Opossums, civets and skunks would be on the hunt for insects, ground squirrels and mice. Raccoons would prospect the spring holes for crawfish and minks would follow the course of the spring runs. Small colonies of rats would be using the marshy expanses.

He visited two bait sets in patches of timber

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without making a catch. The next trap had been set in the mouth of a skunk den and lightly covered with trash. A big short-stripe skunk was waiting for him. Two narrow pin-stripes of white branched away from the white spot on the animal's head and forked back to the shoulders. For the rest the pelt was crow black. Rawhide killed the prize and swung the animal at the end of a pole which he carried across his shoulder to avoid scenting his clothing with the strong musk of the species.

The next den set was unsprung but Rawhide had also learned something of the habit of skunks and he did not remove the trap. He knew that the mere fact of having failed to make a catch was no indication that the den was deserted. Skunks do not travel widely, as do minks, but instead hold largely to the home range, holing up in groups that sometimes number a dozen individuals in one den. At this season of year, when the nights are cold and the animals have put on their heavy layers of fat for the lean winter months, skunks prowl abroad only irregularly. Rawhide

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knew that there might be one or two animals still using the den but that the inclination to rove had failed to operate the preceding night. Perhaps on the next they would feel the urge to prowl and he would find one in the trap.

A narrow-stripe skunk rewarded him at the next den set and he found a civet in a bait trap. His load was proving burdensome so he halted and skinned out a part of his catch. He swung wide to either side of his course to prospect for new sets. Two narrow trails, padded through a weed patch on a sandy knoll, led him to a skunk den and he made a set in the mouth of it. Later he found a sand-bar along a spring run. This had been tracked up by a coon. Clam shells and the remains of crawfish were scattered on the bar and he knew that the animal had repaired to this spot to wash his food before dining. Kennedy had explained this trait of the coon. Rawhide essayed a new sort of set. He placed a trap in the shallow riffle of the spring run, a piece of bright tin clamped on the pan. This would glitter and flash in the moonlight as the water rippled over it and

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would challenge the curiosity of any stray coon passing by. Rawhide bagged an opossum in a bait set and two rats along the spring branches before reaching the end of his line.

Buckskin was in camp before him and they set about preparing their catch. They had learned to case their pelts by making a straight clean cut from the heel of one hind foot across to the opposite heel, a shorter incision at right angles, leading from the center of this original opening to the root of the tail. Through this one orifice the hide was peeled off wrong side out and skinned clear to the lips.

Rawhide set about fleshing out a skunk pelt. A short pole some three inches in diameter had been rounded off on one end with a wood rasp. He slid the pelt over this with the flesh side out. A strip of canvas served as an apron to keep the grease from his clothing as he rested the nose of the hide against his body while the far end of the pole was braced against the ground at the base of a tree. He gripped a steel skate in both hands, the runner blade resting on the nose of the skunk pelt, and pushed away with

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short strokes. The flat edge of the skate scraped off the fat in rolls without injuring the pelt and this was worked back toward the rear end of the hide.

As the pelts were stretched on the casing boards they were hung up in the shade of a tarpaulin rigged between two trees. Kennedy had explained that fur must be dried in the shade; that the sun blackened even prime hides of mink, possum and skunk which should cure out flint white on the flesh side of the skin; prime rats should cure out a yellowish red but these too were turned black when sun-dried.

Buckskin had netted a huge raccoon and this piece of fur was skinned open by slitting the under parts from tail to chin and running an incision at right angles along the under side of each leg. Rawhide cut some light willow poles and fashioned a frame four feet square. The coon hide was spread flat in the center of this hollow frame. A sacking needle was threaded with heavy twine and one whole side of the skin was caught at intervals of one inch, the stitches looping round the pole of the frame.

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The other side and both ends of the pelt were similarly sewed to their respective sides of the rack. Then the loops were drawn tight by taking up the slack. This lacing constituted a pliable stretching apparatus of great sensitiveness, for any strain could be eased off at one point while exerting increased pressure at others. The hide was stretched in a perfect square, as tight as a drum, and the lacing frame placed on edge in the shade of the canvas tarp.

Kennedy had pitched his teepee near the tent and he rode into camp while the boys still worked at their catch. He sat on a down-log and watched their operations with interest.

"You're getting to be old heads at that work," he praised. "That's a good clean-fleshed bunch of fur you've got hanging there. Come another season and you'll be showing me new tricks, you two."

"Neil doesn't bother to flesh his hides very clean," Buckskin remarked. "We were down to his camp a few days ago. He says it doesn't pay for the time it takes up."

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“Neil is like the main run of trappers,” Kennedy said. “Only worse. First off he’s a sooner and traps out his territory before fur primes up. That knocks his prices in half. Then he’s too lazy to flesh his pelts and that cuts into his returns again. When the weather turns off cold and fur stuff holes up and don’t prowl outside much — why then Neil, he’ll hole up too. He won’t work hard at a trap line that only nets one or two pelts a day. That don’t seem like much but the aggregate at the end of a month counts up big. If you boys work hard after the freeze-up you’ll knock off right at forty to fifty pelts in a month, and he won’t. That’s where most trappers fail. They overlook those little points. This Neil is poor sort of folks.”

“He still angles around to make a deal so we’ll let him trap on the Forks,” Buckskin said. “If his country is all trapped out why don’t he move camp?”

“There’s some trapper or other working most every part of the Flint Hills,” Kennedy said. “He’ll be bumping into some other out-

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fit's territory whenever he shifts; so now he wants to work yours. I run across him a few days back down below. He's not the Neil I had him figured to be, but about the same sort. There was a layout of Neils holding out down in the Santag Swamp, about forty miles below where the Clearwater dumps into the Santag River. That would be around fifty miles from here. Folks got down on them, sort of, and they pulled out for the West. When he was telling you about his folks in Wyoming I imagined it was one of those Neils that had come sauntering back, but this fellow's not one of the lot."

Rawhide was dumping the odds and ends from his trap sack as Kennedy inspected the freshly stretched coon skin.

"That's a good job of lacing," he praised. "It's the best job of stretching you've done on a coon up to date."

Rawhide held up a trap.

"We'd have had another to stretch if this fellow hadn't pulled out," he stated.

Kennedy idly inspected the trap, noting the

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few clinging hairs and the mark on the jaws where the animal's leg had been gripped.

"He tore up the bank all around," Rawhide went on. "Left the ground smeared with blood, then pulled out and took to the creek without leaving a track in the mud. I lost two mink too. The traps just hung empty out at the end of the slide pole but the mink had pulled out."

"Hum," Kennedy said. "There's one thing about a slide-pole set. A critter can't get a solid pull on that rubbery willow tip any more than he could on a fish rod. Any time a trap gets enough of a hold on a mink so that he can drag it the length of the slide pole out into deep water he's a drowned mink, that's all! A coon that's gripped high enough to stay in a trap till he's torn up the bank all around isn't apt to pull free without leaving at least a few toes. A trapped fur bearer don't shed any blood till you arrive and kill him by a blow on the head; then he always bleeds at the nose."

Kennedy took a squint at the sun and found it three hours high.

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“Let’s have a look at that spot,” he suggested. “There’s a new kind of critter prowling your line. We’d better ride, for it’s a good piece from here and we won’t make it by sundown if we go afoot. I’ll run Warrior in and rig up a rope hackamore. You can straddle him bareback.”

An hour later they waded into the stream at the point where the coon had escaped. Kennedy carefully studied the sign.

“A fur thief helped your coon to break loose,” he informed. “He got your mink too. He splashed water all over the bank to wash off the blood but he did a poor job. It’s two to one that Neil is the fur snatcher that is doing this work.”

“But his camp is several miles down below,” Rawhide objected.

“It doesn’t matter where a man’s camp is if he’s out to steal fur,” Kennedy stated.

He led the way downstream, examining the bottoms of the shallows. At last he pointed to a boot print under six inches of water.

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“Notice the non-slip pattern on the sole of that boot is different from the tracks your boots leave,” he instructed.

The print was dim and partially filled in with a thin film of sediment but the difference in the sole pattern was apparent.

“That’s Neil’s track,” Kennedy stated. “I noticed his boot soles a few days back, just in case the information might come in handy sometime.”

“But I should think we’d have met him somewhere before now if he’s running our lines,” Rawhide argued.

“He doesn’t work it that way,” Kennedy answered. “He could strike the creek a mile above camp at daylight and work it upstream. Even if you started when he did he would still have a mile lead on you and he’d move right along. He’s in the creek all the way and out of your sight. Likely he doesn’t run your sets out in the open hill country. You might sight him and he’d be sure to leave sign. Probably he just runs your creek sets where he can work from the water, then swings off south and

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circles back to his camp. Have you been missing other catches of late? ”

“ About two days ago,” Rawhide recalled. “ There were three sprung traps on their slide poles and something had pulled out of a trap on a down-log that bridges the creek. Then the same thing happened a couple of days before that, and one day last week I lost several catches.”

“ He works on your line every two days, likely,” Kennedy said. “ It would be interesting to know what happened on Buckskin’s line on the off days between.”

It transpired that Buckskin too had missed many catches but attributed the loss to natural causes. Now that the theft had been fastened on Neil both boys were incensed to the point where their only wish was to raid Neil’s camp and recover their fur without an hour’s delay. The three friends held a council of war round a camp fire that had been kindled between the tent and the teepee.

“ Neil shipped all his fur two weeks back,” Buckskin said. “ Most of what he’s got on

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hand now is ours. I'm for going down right to-night and getting it back."

"Let's go," Rawhide seconded. "I'm ready right now."

Kennedy laid a hand on his shoulder.

"Calm down, Son," he counseled. "Let your hair settle back on your scalp. We'll break even with Neil and maybe a little ahead; but right now we haven't any shred of proof except a boot print under the water and the fact that a few traps have missed fire. If we raid his camp in the open he'd have us all tossed into jail. We'll trip him up in the morning and plan to get our fur back while he's out on his rounds. We'll map out a return steal. Ordinarily I'm not up to that sort of thing but the way to handle a fur thief is just any old way that will get good results. I've got a scheme in mind that will leave him guessing as to whether or not it was us that took the fur from his camp."

"I don't want him to do any guessing," Rawhide asserted. "I want him to know for sure. The fur's ours and he stole it — and I

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want him to be right certain that we got it back.”

“All right; then later we’ll tell him,” Kennedy said. “But up until trapping season is over it won’t do any harm to have him considerable worried. Then he won’t have so much time to put in worrying us. You all turn in for the night and to-morrow we’ll clamp down on Neil.”

IV

RAWHIDE whistled cheerily as he neared Neil's camp. He had left Warrior tethered a quarter of a mile back in the timber, having ridden through the wooded hills south of the Clearwater to reach the spot unobserved. If he should find Neil in camp it was his purpose to stop and visit for an hour; an act which would seem natural enough. Should he find the camp unoccupied he would simply wait. There was no answering call from the tent when he hailed the camp. Neil was gone.

He entered the tent and inspected the fur suspended from the tent pole, — an assortment of some sixty pelts, most of them cured but a few still drying on the stretchers. Rawhide moved to the edge of the trees and sat on a down-log. His eyes were trained on the bald point of a sandstone knob some seven miles up the country. From that point would come the

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signal which would determine his course. His mind was occupied with speculations concerning the activities of his two friends back in camp.

At that precise moment Buckskin and Kennedy were concealed in a thicket of hazel brush which afforded a clear view of a section of the creek where the low flat banks would not furnish sufficient cover to screen any one wading the stream. If Neil should elect to run Buckskin's line he must pass this point, a spot some four miles above camp. They had been stationed there for the best part of an hour, ever since the first light of day.

Battler rose from beside them and Kennedy laid a restraining hand on the big Airedale's head as the dog made a move toward the edge of the thicket.

"Down, Battler," he commanded. "You stay right here."

The dog flattened down once more but his nose quivered eagerly as he tested the wind that drifted from the creek. A soft growl rumbled in his throat.

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Kennedy touched Buckskin's arm and pointed. A man's hat appeared above the bank of the creek. It disappeared behind a clump of trees but after the lapse of a minute it came into view once more as the wearer approached the low flat bank. The man progressed another fifty yards upstream and the watchers could see all of Neil from his knees up. Again he disappeared behind high timbered banks.

The two stalkers moved out of the hazel thicket and angled swiftly across a bend in the creek. Battler's hackle fur fluffed into a roach on his shoulders and Kennedy slipped a short rope through his collar to prevent the dog from making any sudden rush toward the spot from whence came Neil's scent. The two stationed themselves on the bank upstream from the fur thief and sauntered down to meet him. Kennedy slipped the rope when the splash of boots in the water announced that Neil was but a few yards downstream.

The Airedale dashed ahead and came out on the bank a few feet from Neil, his teeth bared



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at the man in the stream. Buckskin and Kennedy hastened toward the sound of his snarls and halted as if in surprise at the sight of Neil.

"Hello," Kennedy hailed. "Battler! You! Come back here! We thought he'd treed a coon or something from the noise he was making," he explained to Neil. "He won't jump you, now that he's recognized you for a friend."

Neil's composure was returning with this evidence that the two on the bank had discovered him through accident and apparently failed to suspect his activities.

"He give me a start," he confessed. "I had just come down across the hills and hadn't no more'n stepped into the creek when he bounced out an' bellowed right in my face. I stayed all night over at Newt Martin's camp across on the Otter Fork and started back before daylight. I was aiming to drop by your camp on the way down."

"Come right along," Kennedy invited. "We haven't breakfasted yet ourselves. Three nights hand-running we've heard a wolf

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howl up in here — first I've heard in the Flint Hills for close onto five years — so we turned out to see if we could get a shot at daylight. Rawhide cut across to run a part of his traps on the way down and we moved off across here. Come on and mosey back with us and we'll stir up a bite to eat."

Neil was entirely reassured by this rambling explanation and he stepped out on the bank.

"Don't bother to run your line down to camp," Kennedy said to Buckskin. "Why don't you swing back in the open and try to knock down a couple of chickens on the way in?"

Buckskin departed with the shotgun. He knew that Kennedy would keep to the bottoms where the timber obscured the view, and once out of sight he sprinted for the point of a lofty sandstone knob half a mile away. He knelt on the summit and touched a match to a pile of dry weeds which he had placed there before daylight.

Miles down the bottoms, Rawhide sat on a log and waited. He consulted his watch. In

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another thirty minutes he would leave and go back to his horse. He started from his seat and peered anxiously at the summit of the distant knob. It seemed that a fine line of white smoke rose from it but he could not be sure. Then the column deepened in shade and he knew it for smoke.

Rawhide hastened back to Neil's tent and swiftly stripped the green fur from the casing boards. He packed these into a canvas grain sack which he carried, added the pelts already cured and headed swiftly for his horse, then lashed the sack on behind his saddle, mounted and made off through the wooded hills south of the creek, holding the horse to a stiff trot. In less than an hour he drew abreast of his own camp at the Forks and stationed himself in the timber a quarter of a mile up the slope that broke up from the South Fork. Presently the ringing strokes of an ax reached his ears, prearranged evidence that Kennedy was back in camp with Neil.

He headed Warrior along the slope, angled down and forded the South Fork half a mile

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above camp and rode straight through the heavy timber of the flat to the bank of the North Fork. Kennedy's saddle was stripped from Warrior and the little bay horse was left free to graze. Rawhide cached both the sack of fur and the saddle in a windfall jam, slipped off Kennedy's moccasins, which he had worn to avoid leaving the least sight around Neil's camp, and donned his own boots. These, along with his trap-sack, had been planted at this spot by Kennedy. The trap-sack was heavy and he found that it contained two rats and a possum. Buckskin and Kennedy had run a few sets near camp before daylight to lend a touch of reality to Rawhide's return from the trap line. He followed the bank to a point near the camp, then took to the stream and came out over the bank when abreast of the tent. Buckskin had beat him to camp by not over ten minutes and had three plump prairie hens to show for the morning's hunt. The return of Kennedy and Neil had not exceeded his own by more than half an hour.

“Not much of a catch,” Rawhide stated,

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dumping the two rats and the possum from the pack sack. "But I didn't cover much of my line."

Neil jerked a thumb at his own sack.

"I've got a few critters in there," he said. "Picked them up last evening in some traps I've got out on the ridges; took 'em out on my way over to Martin's but didn't bother to peel 'em last night. I'll have to hustle back to camp right after breakfast and snatch the pelts off them before they spoil."

Rawhide knew that the contents of Neil's pack sack had been lifted from their own trap line that morning but he was content to see the fur thief depart with his spoils when he reflected upon that sack of fur cached in the windfall.

Neil departed immediately after breakfast.

"There he goes," Kennedy observed, gazing after him, "congratulating himself on what a blind outfit we are. There's a hard jolt waiting him when he gets back and finds his fur gone. He won't be able to figure how any of us had a hand in raiding his camp."

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Two days later they heard that Neil had broken camp and moved out, announcing his destination as the Santag Swamp.

“It looks like he might be one of that Neil outfit that used to hang out down there,” Kennedy remarked when he heard this news. “But I never saw him around with them.”

The stream below the Forks was too deep for wading at many points and Kennedy had hauled in lumber for the construction of a row-boat. They put the finishing touches on the boat on the day that the news of Neil's departure reached them. The muskrats had been well thinned out on the Forks and out on the spring runs and the boys pulled up their rat traps preparatory to working the main Clearwater below, leaving only some forty bait sets and den traps up country for other fur. They set off downstream with sixty traps in the boat. At this point the Clearwater wandered through flat hay meadows, its shores lined with matted patches of slough grass and jungles of willows. Small brush-covered islands studded its course.

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This stretch was a veritable muskrat paradise and every rod of shore line was littered with sign. They trapped the north bank downstream, working the near side of every island en route, and covered the south bank on the up trip, each one taking his turn at the oars while the other put out traps.

"You'll make some heavy catches of rats down there," Kennedy predicted on their return. "One point of good trapping is to work your territory after a system that will bring best results on the whole. First you cleaned out the scattering rats up above. Now you can concentrate on those below the Forks and trap out the thickest of them before the freeze-up. It's hard trapping for bank rats after the ice takes. The big marsh is swarming with muskrats but we'll pass them up for now. You can trap marsh rats after the ice sets in so we'll reserve them till later on. This way you'll do better than if you'd slapped down traps haphazard on the start."

Kennedy had impressed upon them the necessity of properly arranging their work to

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avoid doubling and so wasting a part of their time. Buckskin covered the lower rat lines in the boat while Rawhide took over all the bait sets up country. In this latter work Rawhide found that he could cover far more territory when mounted on Warrior than when trapping on foot. He increased his range to extend two miles farther up the open hills between the Forks, then explored the wooded ridges on the far side of the South Fork. This last investigation was rewarded by the discovery of several skunk and possum dens under the soapstone ledges. He also found two mighty trees, one a sycamore and the other an elm, hollow well toward the tops and used as den trees by coons. He made bait sets near these, using the method Kennedy had told him was often employed in winter trapping for foxes. There were many spring pools that never froze over in winter, their overflow carried off by tiny streams that trickled from their lower extremities. He chose one of these and wired a duck to a rock, placing it in the center of the pool. A trap was set midway

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between the bait and the bank, the shallow water just covering the jaws, while a tuft of moss was secured to the trap pan and this rose above the surface, forming an inviting spot upon which to step as an animal neared the bait. The jaws were draped by shreds of the stringy green moss that had formed in the pool. A similar set was made on the far side of the bait.

It was on this same day that Battler struck some sort of a trail well back among the hills and commenced working it out. Rawhide followed on Warrior, hoping that the dog would lead him to some den tree or a hole in the ledges. Rawhide had come to know that the Airedale's nose was infallible. On half a dozen nights he had disappeared from camp. Later his voice had drifted back to them as he bayed at the foot of some tree which held his prey. The boys had never failed to take the lantern and hasten to the point, and there were pelts of civet, possum and coon to show that Battler never lied when he bawled the news that his prey was treed.

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Battler stopped on the crest of a ridge and gazed off across the country. As Rawhide peered off in the same direction he saw a man cross between two strips of timber. The stranger was undersized, almost dwarfed, and waddled on short bandy legs as he walked. Rawhide attached no special significance to this occurrence and called Battler from the track.

Rawhide's rounds yielded fewer pelts than at first, for muskrats, easiest of all fur to trap, had been cleaned out along the upper lines to the limit which Kennedy considered advisable. The old man never failed to impress upon the boys the fact that a good trapper never traps his territory too closely. But by working hard and riding for new sets every day he never failed to bring in some fur. Civet, possum and skunk, an occasional mink or raccoon, all these helped swell the growing assortment of fur in camp. Day after day Buckskin brought in heavy catches of muskrats from the line below the Forks.

A vast content filled the hearts of both

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boys. Already their catch exceeded all their highest anticipations for the first year's work.

Rawhide was obsessed with the hope of attaining one spot on the earth which he might call his own, — the ambition for ownership. He had seen much of poverty and had observed that those who worked from day to day with no thought of saving for the morrow were always harassed by a swarm of petty apprehensions; fear of losing their jobs; uneasiness lest the next week's pay check would not cover all that they desired to purchase; collectors ever at their doors. In his observations it had occurred to him that people who were owners suffered no such afflictions. One day he would have a piece of land stocked with horses and cows of his own. And this first season's catch would be a big start toward the attainment of his one great ambition.

Both boys had insisted that the catch should be split three ways and that Kennedy should take his third. Kennedy had vetoed this suggestion and explained that a hundred head of

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the cows being wintered in the leases were his own.

“And I’ve got a little other stuff scattered round,” he said. “I don’t rustle from necessity these days; it’s just habit. Brown and I are old friends and he feels that everything will run along all right with me on the job. I get restless when I’m holed up inside and this keeps me outdoors. I feed out a little bunch of stock with his every year. That would hardly be the right thing for me to do, to cut in on your catch when you’re just making a start.”

The first snow of the season was falling and as they sat round the stove they could hear the soft rustle of flakes among the naked branches overhead. An occasional drop of water trickled through the vent left for the stovepipe and splashed with a sharp hiss on the stove.

“I wonder if those foxes will come again on this snow,” Rawhide said. Two days before Kennedy pointed out the tracks of two foxes on a muddy shore. “Maybe we’ll catch one in a spring pool set.”

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“ Maybe — but not likely,” Kennedy returned.

“ Why not?” Rawhide asked. “ Because they’re too smart?”

“ No, because they’re too scarce,” Kennedy said. “ There’s not many round here, only an occasional stray red drifting through. You can catch any sort of a critter after you learn his habits and what sort of a set will fool him. Their ways of traveling, feeding and such are different, and with different degrees of intelligence all the way down the line. Such stuff as possum, skunk and civet will go out of their way to get in a trap. A marten will go a mile to get caught and a lynx or bobcat is plumb stupid after you learn how to attract their attention and get them up near a set. Beaver is as easy to trap as a muskrat. A bear is smart in a good many ways. You’ve got your hands full when you set out to still-hunt a bear, but he’ll walk smack into a trap. Mink and coon are a trifle more shy but not hard to catch. Fox is a whole lot more clever but it’s no hard job for a good trapper to bag him.

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An otter is about the hardest critter to catch, on account of his habits. A coyote is next — on account of his brains. You'll run up against all of those, more or less, when you get out into that country you're headed for. Then you'll have a try for the coyotes and learn what real trapping is. You'll be an artist on the trap line any time you can pinch the toes of the little yellow wolves."

"I'm craving a try at them," Buckskin stated.

"You'll find that oftentimes there's more money in trapping in a small-fur country than there is out in some mountain country working on coyote, cat and such sort of larger fur," Kennedy predicted. "It's a mite more exciting maybe but not always so profitable."

He produced a price list and studied it.

"Fur is crawling up every month," he said. "It's near double what it was last year. You'll have a nice fat little stake by spring."

V

NEIL forded the South Fork and headed for the camp. He found that both boys were out on the trap line and that Kennedy was off riding fence. The camp was temporarily deserted. Neil returned to the point where he had crossed the creek and gave a shrill whistle. An undersized figure scrambled down the timbered slope and the little man mounted Neil's back to be carried across the stream. Neil led the way to the camp.

"Here she is," he said. "Get the lay of it in your mind."

He examined the green hides hanging on the stretchers under the canvas tarpaulin and the bundles of cured pelts suspended from the tent pole.

"I'd have caught all that fur myself if that pair hadn't kept me off the Forks," he said. "This was the best stretch of country for a

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hundred miles. I even offered to pay their fares out where they want to go and have you locate them on a homestead; but they wouldn't hear to my setting out a trap."

The small man grunted impatiently.

"Me locate 'em!" he protested. "I'm not out there any more. I'm here. And besides, they can't homestead till they come of age."

"I thought you were out there then and anyway they wouldn't have discovered either fact till after they got there and tried to file," Neil pointed out. "So I told them I had people out there that would start them right if they'd let me trap the Forks."

"You must have put up a real convincing talk," the small man grumbled. "They're still here. And here's right at a thousand dollars' worth of fur. That's enough for me."

He snapped the string which held a bundle of mink pelts to the tent pole.

"Don't you!" Neil ordered sharply.

His companion pulled down a second bale of fur. Neil seized his arm and jerked him back as he reached for a third.

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“ You want to get us jailed? ” he demanded.

“ You dragged me clear up here to lift this fur,” the dwarfish one stated. “ Let’s get it! You put it off till the snow caught us and we couldn’t get near without leaving our tracks. You want to wait for another snow that may lay on the ground for months? Right now suits me.”

He reached again for a bundle of fur but Neil jerked his arm savagely and moved outside the tent, where he peered off in all directions.

“ I’ve got to stay in the clear,” he declared. “ We’d have been gone with it now except that Brown saw me the first day I landed and he knows I’m back in the country. Nobody knows you’re this side of the pit. They’ll link me up with it sure unless I can prove to the contrary, and that fellow Kennedy would never quit till he had me picked up if I stopped anywheres short of Siam. He’s a hard nut, that old lizard, and he’ll back those two stray kids to the limit. I don’t want him camped on my trail.”

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"I suppose you want him on mine," the small man asserted.

"He don't know you're in the country," Neil returned. "I'll stay over at Brown's every minute of the day you lift this fur. That'll let me out. It's got to be that way since Brown saw me up in the hills. Then I'll join you in a couple of days."

Neil's counsel prevailed and he rearranged the bundles of fur in their original positions and led the way to the creek, forded it with the dwarfed man riding his back, and disappeared in the timber of the slope.

Two days thereafter Rawhide rode into camp and prepared to skin out the skunk, mink and two possums that constituted his catch for the day. Something seemed amiss but for a space of thirty seconds he could not place what it was. Then he noted the absence of green hides on the stretchers under the tarp. The full sense of disaster failed to penetrate at once and he gazed stupidly for a moment, then whirled and peered into the tent. The compact bales of cured fur were gone.

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Day after day he had counted those pelts and exulted over every addition that helped swell their growing assortment of fur. Their catch had loomed large as a stepping stone to future ambitions and he had dreamed great dreams. This sudden wiping out of their entire resources left him stunned. The squeak of oarlocks came from down the creek. Buckskin was coming in from his round of the lower trap line. A species of inertia seemed to lay hold of Rawhide and numb his faculties. He sat upon a log and all the brightness seemed gone from the earth. The lapse of time between the discovery and the moment when his partner made the boat fast to the bank was sufficient to bring about a revulsion of feeling. The determination to recover the fur surged through him and roused an intense desire for action. When Buckskin reached the tent his partner was scouting the vicinity for some sign that would reveal the identity of the thief.

Battler sniffed at several objects that had been touched by the intruder and struck a track which he worked out to the bank of the

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South Fork. Rawhide took the shotgun and followed.

“He’s on the trail,” he said. “Come on.”

But the dog was puzzled. The trail was cold and he could not find even a trace on the far shore. He had hunted coons that had taken to the water to break their trails so he now employed tactics similar to the ones he used on such cases, scouting both banks for some sign of the trail leaving the water. Rawhide saw him pass one spot and return to it. He repeated this manoeuvre, then branched away from the creek and circled through the timber. But the man’s boots had been thoroughly cleansed by the long wade and Battler could not work out the cold trail.

Rawhide investigated the spot where Battler had left the creek. He found one faint boot print under water.

“That’s Neil’s boot,” he announced. He had never forgotten the sole pattern which Kennedy had pointed out near the scene of the stolen coon.

Kennedy rode into camp as they returned.

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He shook his head when Rawhide named Neil as the thief.

“ Couldn’t have been,” he stated positively. “ I’ve just come from Brown’s, and Neil has been there all yesterday and to-day. Says he’s going to pull up-country in two or three days.”

“ But that boot track,” Rawhide objected.

“ Some other boot the same kind as Neil’s,” Kennedy said. “ Or maybe some man wearing Neil’s boots. Let me study this out. We’ve got to get back that fur.”

He called Battler and headed for the South Fork. In two hours he was back in camp, but with all his knowledge of woodcraft he had been able to unearth but little additional sign. However, his mind had not been idle. It was certain that all the fur could not have been transported in one load, its bulk precluding such a possibility, yet only one man had been concerned in it. Kennedy had found where the thief had left the creek some fifty yards upstream on his second trip. It would have required almost an hour to make two trips between the camp and this point and the man

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must have been armed with accurate information as to the habits of the three who lived at the camp. A stray prowler drifting through and stumbling upon the tent by chance would never have come back for the second load of fur, for he would not know at what moment the occupants might return. Neil was the one man who knew that each one of the boys had a regular route and seldom returned before mid-afternoon and that Kennedy rode fence on certain days.

The boys had based high hopes on Kennedy's woodcraft. A dozen times during his absence they had attempted to reassure themselves by stating that Kennedy would come in with accurate news of the one who had raided their camp and they were numbed by the shock of disappointment when he dropped from his horse and shook his head.

"Hardly a scratch," he announced. "But we'll get that fur back or nail somebody's hide to the fence."

He knew what this loss meant to the two homeless boys. Their world had crashed about

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their ears with this sudden sacking of the camp. Kennedy explained his train of reasoning.

“Neil is in this,” he said. “But he had some other man do the work while he stuck close round Brown’s place so we couldn’t link him up with it. Later they’ll meet some place and split. The only way I know is for me to keep a line on Neil and try and follow him when he leaves.”

“How about that friend of his — Martin?” Rawhide asked. “The one he visited over on Otter Fork?”

“No such party,” Kennedy informed. “Neil invented him on the spur of the moment to account for his being up the South Fork at that hour in the morning.

“Newt Sanders has trapped the Otter Fork for ten years. There’s no other trapping camp within fifteen miles and if there was there’d be no way for them to learn our habits. That fellow had to make two trips up the creek. He knew we wouldn’t be back. Then he could relay the two packs a mile at a time and be way off across the hills before ever we discovered it.

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No way to tell which way he headed. Maybe he cached the fur or maybe he had a pack horse, but I couldn't pick up a horse track. We'll go out and scour the hills on the off chance that we'll find him coming back to a cache to-night to make off with his haul."

They scattered through the hills and moved silently, listening for some sound which might indicate the presence of the thief. Once Rawhide heard the popping of a dead limb under a heavy foot. A moment later he heard the swish of brush across a canvas coat. He stationed himself behind a tree, the shotgun at ready, and tensed himself to shoot if it proved to be the thief and he refused to surrender the fur without a fight. There was the sound of a foot striking a down-log, then a low whistle which had been arranged as a signal between the three. Rawhide answered it and joined Buckskin, who had heard his partner's progress through the timber and headed for the spot, believing it might prove to be the thief.

"Good thing Kennedy arranged that sig-

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nal," Buckskin whispered. "We might have been shooting at each other without that. Kennedy thinks of everything — never overlooks a point."

They separated again to prowl the hills. By midnight they were back in camp. Battler had failed to pick up any sign of an intruder, which he would certainly have done if any had been abroad in the country covered by their circling. An hour before their return he had treed a possum and his music would have apprised any man within earshot that the three were scouring the hills near that point.

It was not until after their return that Rawhide recalled the dwarfish man he had seen some five days before and mentioned the fact to Kennedy.

Kennedy laid a hand on his shoulder and looked down at him.

"Son, you ought to take more notice of such things," he said. "That's the man that got your fur. If you'd mentioned at the time about seeing him I'd have guessed right off and moved our catch up to Brown's."

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“But how would you have known?” Rawhide objected.

“First off, there’s not a house off up that way for fifteen miles,” Kennedy explained; “nor even a camp, which fact ought to have set you thinking in itself. He wouldn’t be trapping for there’s mighty little fur up on those ridges; there’s nothing to hunt besides cottontails and squirrels and he wasn’t even packing a gun. Now if that’s the little sawed-off spider I’m thinking of his name is Neil. He was one of the two that hung out down in the Santag Swamp before they got chased out. Likely our friend Neil is a branch of the same tribe after all and since this one has come back from the West he’s put him up to this job. This simplifies matters some — but not a tenth part as much as if you’d told me two hours before dark.”

“I’ve never thought of it since,” Rawhide lamented. “But how could you have done any differently than what we did to-night?”

“I’d have hunted downstream instead of up-country,” Kennedy said. “Men run true

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to form, sort of. Any man that lives in the Flint Hills would plan to get that fur out on a horse because they live mostly on horses. This fellow was pretty much of a swamp dweller so his ideas would naturally lean toward boats. Ten to one he's been scouting back in the hills like a coyote waiting for this chance, and had a boat cached a few miles below. The very fact that he headed upstream first is probably because he figured your mind would work like his and you'd hunt downstream for his tracks. Then he doubled back and relayed his furs down along the slopes and cached them till night. While we were prowling up-country he was way down below getting them to his boat. I may be way off but it's the best guess I can make. You turn in for some sleep. It's out before sun-up for us."

What little sleep Rawhide gathered was of a feverish sort. The loss of the fur and the consequent crumbling of his plans preyed on his mind and served to keep him awake. Buckskin tossed restlessly beside him throughout the balance of the night and it was with a sense

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of relief that they heard Kennedy's hail from the teepee two hours before dawn.

"Turn out," he called. "Time to be off. I'll get breakfast while you boys strap your bed roll and pack it to the boat. Then we'll sack up some grub. We may be off on a long hunt with no telling when we'll see camp again. Rawhide, you throw my saddle on Warrior. One of us will maybe have to make a ride."

Daylight found them below Brown's line fence, Buckskin and Kennedy in the boat while Rawhide rode Warrior along the bank. They slowed their pace and Kennedy investigated every nook which might serve as a hiding place for a boat. Where little spring creeks broke into the Clearwater he prospected back up the willow-grown channels wherever it seemed possible that a man might have dragged even a light canoe.

When something over a mile below the fence he left the boat and waded up the narrow channel of a spring run, the tops of the tall willow brush meeting over his head. He hailed the

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boys from a few yards beyond and Buckskin tied the boat and waded up to him while Rawhide put Warrior into the stream and forded it.

“Here’s where his boat was cached,” Kennedy announced. “So far we’re right.”

The bark of some few willows had been rubbed by the edge of the boat. The tangle of brush had been spread apart by the passage of some heavy body and not all of the saplings had lifted back into place. Beyond the twenty-yard fringe of willows the rank stand of slough grass had been bent over by several journeys through it. Kennedy pointed to one stretch of bank which showed more moisture than the rest and looked inquiringly at Rawhide.

“He splashed water over it to wash out the sign,” Rawhide said. “The same as Neil did when he stole my coon out of the trap.”

“That’s what,” Kennedy assented. “You’re learning fast. He’s wearing Neil’s boots or a pair just like ’em. Now he didn’t start bringing down that fur from wherever he

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cached it till after nightfall and it would take up considerable time, so he didn't leave here till late. Even at that he would have a big start, only that he'll lay up somewhere during the day. There's twenty miles of the Santag River that's pretty well lined up with farms. A hundred people might see him if he covered that stretch when it's light and he couldn't have made it past the whole bottoms before daylight this morning, what with switching back and forth across the channel to dodge bars and such. At low water the Santag is mainly sand-bars and a man will travel five miles for every three he gains downstream. We may nip him yet."

Kennedy scribbled hastily on three sheets of his note book, detached them and handed them to Rawhide who headed out across the Flint Hills. He stopped at Brown's and handed him the first sheet. The second page contained directions for his day's travel and he consulted it from time to time. His course was angling and cut off much distance from the route leading along the shore line. He held Warrior to

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a shuffling trail trot and occasionally pulled him to a walk for he had forty miles to cover before night. He followed the high ground well back from the river without descending to the wide bottoms of the Santag, thickly settled for a long stretch on the near side of the river. The bottoms narrowed eventually and pinched out where the stream entered a gorge flanked by limestone bluffs. At the far end of this little canyon he rode out onto the shoulder of a hill and viewed a vast, timbered flat spread out below him, the sheen of water showing in every opening between the trees. The main channel of the river skirted the bluffs on the near shore but there was no definite bank on the far side, the water apparently spreading through the timber without check.

He rode down till he struck a small creek flowing to the river. A mile up its course an open glade was fenced off for a pasture and a small log cabin stood on the far edge of it. The third note was destined for McIntyre, the man who dwelt here, requesting his assistance. The cabin was locked and gave no evidence of

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recent occupancy. There was no help to be gained in this quarter and it was squarely up to Rawhide to do his single-handed best. He hung saddle and bridle over a log, thrust the note under the cabin door in case McIntyre should return, and headed for the river, carrying his grub sack and the shotgun.

Night was shutting down when he reached the river and headed downstream till he drew abreast of the first tongues of the swamp on the opposite side. After half a mile the channel swept away from the high country and he could progress no farther and keep within sight of it as there were lanes of water reaching back through the swales between the timbered hummocks. But he could not stop now.

The water was icy cold and chilled his whole body as he stripped off his clothing and waded in, carrying his lunch sack and garments lashed to the barrel of the shotgun. He felt his way cautiously lest he step off into a deep hole and find himself over his depth and his equipment soaked. Eventually he came out on a flat piece of ground that flanked a long open

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stretch of water. A sluggish current testified that this was the main channel of the Santag.

Rawhide was blue with cold and the crisp air stung his skin. He stamped and swung his arms to restore circulation and dry his body before pulling on his garments, then posted himself behind a log jam which commanded a long stretch of the channel either way from his stand.

Black night shut down around him and left him alone in the swamp. Hour after hour he listened without catching the sound for which his ears were strained although the night seemed full of other weird noises. Some tree near him groaned as if in agony with every breeze that stirred its top. Across from him two slanting dead trees squeaked loudly at the intersection of their crossed trunks, which grated together with every wind-swayed movement of the living trees upon which they leaned. Once some creature splashed in the swamp close at hand. Owls hooted hollowly from far and near and lent a ghostly quality to the night. The cold gripped him but he

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dozed off several times, only to rouse with a start and peer off into the shadows.

At last the sound came — the distant squeak of rowlocks from upstream. They drew nearer and he caught the muffled splash of oar blades in the water. Kennedy had figured rightly. If only McIntyre had been at home and ready with his boat they might even now intercept the thief and recover his cargo of stolen fur. The sounds drew abreast of him but the boatman kept to the far side of the stream in the shadow of the timber and he could not even make out the dark blot of the boat upon the water.

Rawhide's eyes were accustomed to the darkness and he could travel at a fair rate of speed. He followed after the boat, his feet making no sound on the moist earth. After a quarter of a mile the boat had almost distanced him but he held on. The open channel swept back toward the bluffs two miles behind and he followed the curve. He stopped to listen again for the squeak of oars. They drifted faintly to his ears but seemed to come

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from directly opposite instead of from far downstream as before. It came to him that the man no longer followed the sweep of the main channel but had turned off into some watery byway instead. He strained his ears and at last the sounds died away without having gained either upstream or down. The boatman had headed directly back into the depths of the swamp.

After marking the spot by a small stick thrust into the mud at the water's edge he retraced his way to the log jam and ate a few bites of his lunch. The balance of the night seemed months long as he alternately dozed and roused to stamp about and warm his chilled body. He dared not light a fire lest its light should apprise the man of the fact that he had been traced this far and send him deeper into the swamp. After a period that seemed ages long a faint gray streak showed in the east. Rawhide heard again the squeak of oars, very soft this time, as if the oarlocks had been greased to eliminate all sound. The splash of oars was barely audible. Then the sounds

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ceased as the boatman rested on the oars. Into the silence came the first few bars of a red-bird's whistle as if the cardinal had been roused from sleep to greet the false dawn; another brief spell of rowing and another silence of shipped oars. The redbird's whistle came again. Rawhide breathed a sigh of relief and moved to the bank. That was Kennedy's signal. Buckskin and Kennedy had taken turns at the oars all night and reached the swamp.

VI

THE three drifted down the sluggish current, bolting a hasty bite of cold breakfast as the shadows lifted in the east. Tired as they were they could not afford to stop for a rest.

Rawhide pointed out his marker at the water's edge.

"Whoever it was in the boat turned back into the swamp right across from here," he said.

Kennedy headed the boat for the opposite shore. Within two hundred yards there were three broad lanes of water leading back between wooded banks.

"We'll take the middle one on a chance," Kennedy decided. "The worst thing about the Santag Swamp is the fact that you can't guess in advance whether a patch of water will prove a blind lead or run on for miles."

After half a mile the open lane feathered out into branching waterways and there was no way

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to determine which one their man had chosen. Kennedy selected one that angled off toward the right as being a more likely route for the reason that it led toward the depths of the swamp. The water was shallow and as the boat glided along Kennedy peered over its side and scanned the mud a few inches below the surface.

“A man will naturally dip a little too deep from force of habit and let his oars slice into the bottom where it’s as shallow as this,” he explained.

Several times he nodded as he made out the slash of an oar blade in the mud bottom.

“He came this way,” he announced.

But after following the lane for some four hundred yards it suddenly terminated in a little bay that widened out among the trees. Kennedy backed water with the oars to arrest the advance of the boat as he scanned every inch of shore line. There were no trees at this point within fifty yards of the water’s edge and an oozing mud flat merged almost imperceptibly with the water.

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“The tree line is high-water mark,” Kennedy said. “A man couldn’t cross that mud flat without wallowing up to his hips. He never crossed out through here. He’s cut back somewhere down below.”

They headed the boat back along its former course and Kennedy examined every watery lead that branched away from it. The majority of these were mere indentations that pinched out within a few yards of the mouth, the water too shallow to permit the passage of a boat. There were several which led farther back and Kennedy stood up in the boat to determine their possibilities. At last he pointed to a channel some five feet across, leading straight back through the trees for a dozen yards, only to end in a sloping bank. At the extreme tip of this the slash of an oar blade showed on the mud of the bank.

“That makes a square turn,” Kennedy announced. “He slid into it with shipped oars and gave one dig to throw him round the bend.”

He headed the nose of the boat at the mouth

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of the narrow lead and two strokes of the oars furnished sufficient momentum to carry the boat to the turn after he lifted the oars. A single swift slice at the bank with one oar veered the boat around the sharp bend and the waterway widened perceptibly, then twisted again and swept on toward the heart of the swamp.

Twice more they were delayed by branching lanes but each time Kennedy found some sign which revealed which way the boat had passed; the marks of oar blades on the mud bottom of the shallows or a single clean slice on the shore. Once it was a sleek patch on the bank at the water line which guided him up a narrow passage. The boatman had headed into it with shipped oars after gathering momentum, and the side of the gliding boat had sheered along one bank and smoothed the mud for six feet along the water's edge.

They had worked out the trail for a distance of four miles back into the swamp by the time the sun was two hours high. Here there was a veritable network of passages breaking into

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one another and feathering out in every direction. A boatman might turn off on either hand at will.

“It’s time for us to hole up,” Kennedy asserted. “He might be asleep after putting in two hard nights — and again he might be awake. From now on we’d have to work out every foot of his trail and he’d hear us messing round before we got within half a mile of his hangout. He’d take to his boat and he could travel at about forty times the rate at which we could track him.”

He chose a blind lead that made a sharp bend into a patch of high ground. This served to conceal the boat. The bed rolls were spread on the ground.

“If that fellow you saw in the hills was Bantam Neil, he’s got a regular hangout down here from years past,” Kennedy said. “And all the signs point to him. He couldn’t even guess we were anywhere this side of camp and might be a bit careless in moving round. One of us will have to stand guard and keep awake in case he stirs up any racket that will tip off

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his whereabouts, or in case Reese Neil comes in through the swamp to join him. You boys turn in for a nap and I'll stand first guard."

Rawhide insisted, however, that the first guard should be his and Kennedy assented.

"If we only had Battler we wouldn't need a guard," Buckskin said.

"If we had Battler we might as well go home," Kennedy returned. "That's why I left him chained up at Kell's farm on the way down. He'd likely tree a possum first off and make enough noise to rouse the whole swamp. If ever the Neils get a notion we're here they'll decamp. Our game now is to wait."

Rawhide stood his turn for two hours. The whole world seemed wrapped in a vast silence except for a few bird notes. Once a belated bittern that had failed to move south with the rest of his tribe boomed from far out in the swamp. Rawhide roused his partner at the end of two hours and turned in for a much-needed rest. The whole day passed without a sound that might have been made by a human.

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Three different times one of the boys had scaled a tall tree that grew on the knoll and scanned the swamp for some ribbon of smoke which would indicate the presence of human habitation but not the faintest haze drifted above the trees.

An hour after sundown Kennedy built a small fire, its light shrouded by blankets, and cooked a hot meal. The swamp was in the grip of a dead calm and the night as silent as the day except for the infrequent splash of some small fur bearer. At last Kennedy held up his hand. The strokes of an ax, far and faint, drifted to their ears.

"There he is," Kennedy said. "A mile or more off I'd say. At daylight we'll shift camp a notch closer and lay up for the day."

This move was made, and before the sun showed above the eastern horizon the boat was safely cached and the bed rolls spread in a thick cluster of trees some three-quarters of a mile nearer the point from which the ax had sounded the preceding night.

"He might come poking along this way in

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a boat and we'll hold him up and tie him to a tree," Kennedy said. "Then we could go on and locate his den. Or maybe we can catch the glow of his night fire. My note to Brown told of the raid and that two of us were hunting up-country while Rawhide rode to town to post a reward for the thief. Brown has told Neil. Neil figures he's in the clear and he'll likely come sifting down here before long. Anyway, we'll have to wait for something to break."

Only once during the day was there indication of life in the swamp. This was a hollow boom as if some heavy object had been dropped in the bottom of a boat. It served to point out the direction of Bantam Neil's retreat and Kennedy estimated that it could not be more than a half mile farther on.

"Once we've located it exactly and find a clear water route to the spot we can move in on him quick," Kennedy explained. "If we make one false move to inform him we're anywhere near it's all off. He wouldn't need over a five-minute start to shake us."

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Just before dusk Kennedy held up his hand for silence.

“Boat coming from the other way,” he whispered. “Don’t even wag an ear while it’s passing. It’s a canoe, not a rowboat. I can tell by the dip of the paddle; and twice he’s bumped the paddle shank as he rested it on the edge to drift; likely a log dugout the Neils had cached out at the edge of the swamp. If this is Reese Neil our calculations have checked out correct.”

The three sprawled flat behind a windfall at the edge of the little hollow which sheltered their makeshift camp. A canoe shot into sight and passed along an open lane of water. All three recognized Reese Neil as he came abreast of their log screen. Kennedy stood up to peer over the top log of the windfall after Neil had passed. The sounds of the paddle died out in the distance.

“I’ve got his course marked out for the next four hundred yards,” Kennedy announced. “I could catch a glimpse of his hat here and there long after the canoe was out of sight.

We know how to get that far and it hadn't ought to be far from there to the camp."

During the early part of the night there were various sounds from the direction in which the canoe had disappeared.

"We'll try her in the morning," Kennedy decided.

As soon as there was sufficient light for them to see fifty yards ahead they were in the boat. Kennedy had greased the rowlocks to eliminate any possible squeak, and as he followed Neil's route of the evening past he dipped his oars with exceeding care to avoid the least splash, dodging the water-soaked logs with which the swamp was studded. Even a single bump of the boat against one of these snags might serve to warn their quarry.

"This is where I caught the last peek at his hat," Kennedy whispered at last. "We're close onto them but there's a hundred little feathering sloughs to choose from. We'll head right through the middle of them. Here's hoping the Neils are asleep."

He held on for another three hundred yards

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and rested his oars, signaling for silence as he peered off to the right. A distant voice had drifted faintly to his ears. He headed the boat into a slough and eased it along without a sound. The waterway ended in a round pool. A rowboat was tied to a huge log that slanted up the bank from the water. The top of the log was worn by the passage of many feet. He eased the nose of the boat against the bank and Rawhide stepped out and made it fast to a snag. In leaving the boat Buckskin picked up the oars to hand them out to Kennedy, as it had been agreed that they should cache the oars whenever they left the boat. In his haste he allowed them to slip from his hands and they fell to the boat with a clatter that sounded for a mile through the silent swamp.

“Quick!” Kennedy ordered sharply. “Make it lively. That’ll start them off.”

He mounted the bank with the boys close behind him and struck off through the timber at a trot. Within a hundred yards he caught the gleam of water between the tree trunks and knew that the high ground was but a narrow

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strip; but it might be a long island, and he headed to the left through a tangle of wind-falls. He had confidently expected to find a beaten path from the log but there was none and it occurred to him that the landing was an old one, previously much used but not sufficiently traveled of late to leave a trail.

Another hundred yards and he made out the white of a tent through the timber and motioned the boys to swing out to either side of his route. Kennedy was first to reach the tent and he peered through the flap, his gun thrust before him, but there was no occupant for his pistol to cover. The two boys were closing in from either side.

“They’ve gone with the fur,” he called. “After ’em! Quick!”

He leaped into the tangle of blowdowns behind the tent, struck a path and followed it. Rawhide was forty yards on his right flank and his advance was retarded by dodging down-logs. Kennedy was well in the lead when Rawhide observed a movement directly in front of him. Bantam Neil’s head and

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shoulders appeared above a windfall and his rifle was trained on Kennedy. Rawhide lined along the barrel and at the roar of the shotgun Neil pitched down behind the logs while his rifle clattered down the opposite side of the windfall. Reese Neil's hat showed for an instant off to the right of his companion's stand and Rawhide shot again, then a third time at some moving shape that darkened the space between two breast-high logs. There was no further sign of life and Rawhide lay prone on the ground and watched the spot.

Kennedy had whirled at the first shot and made for Rawhide's location. He had seen neither of the Neils in the tangle off to his right. Rawhide pointed out the spot.

"Bantam Neil, — he was going to shoot," he said. His face had whitened with the thought that he had killed two men. "Then Reese Neil. I killed them, I guess."

"I hope so," Kennedy stated with conviction. "They're poison hounds, both of 'em."

He was heading for the windfall and Rawhide rose to follow him. Buckskin was an-

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gling swiftly in from the left. Kennedy rounded the end of the logs at a run but halted suddenly as he stumbled against a huge bale of furs. A similar bale had been dropped some twenty yards farther on through the timber.

"Here's what we came after," he announced. "Let's take it and get out of here. I'd rather hoped to take this Neil outfit back for a chat with the sheriff but they're gone in the canoe by now. Likely they had it cached on the far side from the rowboat so they'd have two routes of retreat. It didn't take 'em over ten seconds to get started away from the tent with that fur after Buckskin dropped the oars."

"Then I didn't kill either one," Rawhide said with evident relief.

"Too far for a shotgun," Kennedy returned. "But you must have nicked Bantam's ear or spattered the bridge of his nose with bird shot to make him drop that gun. Hope you filled Reese's hide with shot too."

They retrieved Neil's rifle and shouldered

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the bales of fur. These were so bulky as to cause them considerable difficulty in threading the timber to the boat. Somewhat later the swamp echoed again to the roar of the shotgun as Kennedy touched off two loads of shot through Neil's boat and tore two ragged holes at the water line.

Three days thereafter they were back in the home camp at the forks of the Clearwater. The recovered fur was safely stored at Brown's and both boys were busily engaged in stripping the pelts from thirty-odd rats and two mink gathered from the lower trap line, which Buckskin had run on the homeward trip of the boat.

All seemed well with the world. The Neils had been outlawed by the theft and were wanted by the sheriff. The season's catch was intact and they were still catching fur. The first swirling flakes of snow were sifting down through the trees.

"She's going to blow up a storm," Kennedy said. "Fur critters will be running to-night. They always come out to prowl just prior to a

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storm. Then they hole up during the cold snap that follows. There's times when you won't see a track, except rabbits and such, if it turns off cold after a snowfall."

"If my bait traps have pinched the toes of as much fur in six days' accumulation as Buckskin's rat lines did I'll hardly be able to pack in all my catch to-morrow night," Rawhide speculated. "Here's hoping."

The following morning he set out on Warrior to ride his lines while the snow whirled through the hills. He had been toughened to the saddle by much riding and even the long day's ride back from McIntyre's cabin on the edge of the Santag Swamp had failed to stiffen him. The rough life in the open had expanded his chest, and the city pallor which had stamped his face a few months past had been replaced by a healthy brown; his muscles were tough and springy and the stoop was gone from his shoulders.

He took a mink from a bait set under the overhanging roots of an elm and found a coon waiting for him in the big log jam above

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camp. Then there was trap after trap that had not been touched. This monotony induced preoccupation and his thoughts were of the future as he continued on his rounds. He was roused from his abstraction with a start by the movement of some large object off to the right of him. Warrior snorted and sidled uneasily. Rawhide had almost forgotten the trap on the down-log bridging the creek at this point for it had not made a catch in three weeks. A big red fox paced nervously to and fro on the log, his foot fast in the trap.

Rawhide rode into camp that night with a big catch of fur, the last good haul of the winter. The snow fell without a break for three days and all the world was smothered in white. A freeze-up followed the storm. The shore ice prevented the trapping of bank rats and the water sets on the Clearwater were pulled. As snow followed snow the bait sets were increased and water sets were made at the spring pools that never froze over; but the fur seemed to have vanished from the face of the earth and catches were few.

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They worked hard at their lines nevertheless, for each added pelt was that much to the good. Mink still traveled when the cold was not too intense and civets were prone to prowl abroad long after their larger cousins, the skunks, had dened for the winter. A few stray foxes left their tracks in the snow. There were brief chinooks when warm winds fanned their breath across the hills for a few days at a time. During these warm snaps an occasional coon or possum strayed out of his winter quarters and planted his foot on a trap. Only three skunks were caught over the course of two months, these latter being bagged when their tribe grew restless and came from the dens during a week's thaw; but the skunks holed up once more when a cold wave followed this touch of false spring. A big dog fox was caught in a spring pool set. All told, they averaged a trifle over one pelt a day for two months.

The fur was beginning to slip and the trap lines were pulled, for Kennedy explained that rubbed hides or spring shedders brought even

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less on the market than unprime hides caught too early in the fall.

“Anyway, you’ve caught enough from up there. Never trap too close, but be dead sure and leave plenty of critters to raise another crop of fur for next year,” Kennedy said when the last trap was in. “Now we’ll work the big marsh. This will be a little different from any trapping you’ve done up to date.”

The snow lay deep across the ice of the marsh but it was beginning to pack and melt off before the thaws of approaching spring. Kennedy pointed out scores of white mounds rising above the flat plain of ice.

“Those are rat houses, built of rushes and mud,” he said. “Marsh rats live in houses instead of tunneling into the banks. We could cut in through the walls of the houses and trap them that way but I never break into rat houses now. It drives the rats out and they’ve no place to go. I’ll show you a better way.”

He pointed out numerous smaller bumps that had been left above their surroundings as the snow melted down.

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“Those are what trappers call push-ups,” he said. “A rat cuts up through the ice to the snow line and makes a feed shelf on the ice and under the snow. He comes there with slough grass, willow roots, water plants and such. After he eats the best part he pushes what’s left up into the snow over his head instead of spilling it back into the water.”

He broke the snow crust above a push-up and uncovered a heap of vegetable refuse underneath. This he pried apart with the handle of his hand-ax and revealed a small shelf at the under edge of the snow. A hole led down through solid ice to the water. He had brought a bundle of three-foot willows an inch in diameter. The trap chain was fastened in the center of one so that any pull would be exerted crosswise and the stick could not be pulled down through the hole. The trap was set on the shelf and the vegetable refuse closed again at the top, the stick remaining outside of the push-up.

“There you are,” Kennedy said. “Go to it. All trapping is simple once you get lined

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out — and considerable difficult if you don't savvy the right kinds of sets for special sorts of work. There's push-ups in hundreds, all over the marsh. In a few days now they'll be showing up black as the snow melts off the top. Then you can spot them a mile. Spring rat hides are better than fall."

The boys had learned that the pelt of the muskrat is prime in the spring when the fur of most others will slip. Later they would come to know that this was equally true of beaver and bear.

They made sixty sets before night and the next day's run yielded two dozen rats. They gloated over this big catch after the weeks of hard work on the bait lines with an average of but one pelt a day. But the season's yield as a whole had run large. Up to date they had the pelts of some five hundred rats, sixty-three mink, forty-one coons, two of red fox and seventy odd each of civet, possum and skunk.

"You boys have made a nice stake," Kennedy said. "As pretty a bunch of fur as I've seen in many a year; all clean-fleshed and not

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an unprime fall hide or a spring rubbed or shedder in the lot. Fur's taken another little hitch upward in price. We'll take this fur to market ourselves. I figure you ought to clean up close to eighteen hundred dollars on the bunch if you knock out another two hundred rats down on the marsh. Then you can work down at Brown's for the summer and add a little to the pile without cutting into your capital for expenses. That piece of land and all those cows you're figuring to own some day are looming right near if you keep this up."

VII

A SLENDER, wiry youth pulled up his horse and slipped sidewise in the saddle, resting one hand on the animal's rump as he looked back at the vista spread out below him. The valley widened as it fell away from him and a swift stream boiled through the rocks and tumbled toward the low country. Cottonwoods and willow clumps studded the stream bed, an occasional spruce thrusting up from among the deciduous trees. Aside from this water-course timber the land was treeless except for the scattered cedars, gnarled and wind-twisted, that sprouted from among the boulders of the sidehills. Here and there a piñon pine had found roothold among the clusters of sandstone outcroppings that had been worn into weird shapes by erosion. Far down the bottoms a flat spread out between the twin buttes that stood as sentinels at the mouth

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of the valley. Between these buttes an endless expanse of gray sage rolled away to the far horizon. The flat was marked by a small square of vivid green, evidence that here the home of some man had been made possible by irrigation.

Once the boy had been Bob Tanner of the congested city, and had dreamed that he was Rawhide, the free lance of the open. Now that the fact itself was accomplished, there was no further use for the fanciful title that had fostered pretense and it had been relegated to the past; for he was now Bob Tanner, not of the city, but of the sage country, the lodgepole valleys and the snow-capped mountain ranges. The boy's eyes lingered fondly on that distant square of green that had come to mean home to him. Then he turned and headed his horse up-country.

The trail mounted steeply to the notch in the rims where Bobcat Creek broke through from the higher hills. It was plainly blazed after he entered the timber, for it was a Forest Service pack trail. He followed it through a valley of

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stately lodgepole pines, their trunks rising straight and true as rifle barrels as they stretched their tufted tops toward the sun.

The horse nickered and drew an answer from just ahead. Bob had arranged to meet Dickson, the local Forest Ranger, at this point, and found him waiting round a bend in the trail.

"All right, Bob," Dickson greeted. "We'll get those trees marked out for your house logs in less than an hour. I have to go on up to the sheep camp as soon as we've finished."

The ranger led his horse as they angled up the slope through the trees but Bob elected to leave his own animal tied near the trail. A hundred yards from the start the ranger laid his hand on the trunk of a lofty lodgepole. It was twelve inches through at the butt, rising straight and true.

"How's this fellow?" Dickson asked.

Bob nodded his approval and Dickson blazed a patch on the trunk six inches from the ground with his ranger's hatchet, then swung the butt against the white wood and the U. S.

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brand loomed in the center of the blaze, evidence that this tree had been legally marked for cutting. They tacked back and forth, angling up-country, and in something over an hour had marked out forty trees that were perfectly matched for size. The ranger had also blazed a hundred smaller trees which could be used for corral poles, selecting these from among heavy stands of young growth in order that the trees might be thinned out and give the remaining ones room for growth. Then Dickson rode away, headed for the sheep camp. This camp lay twenty miles beyond along the pack trail, just at timber line. Here a sheep outfit whose home ranch was well out in the flats on the far flank of the hills ranged their flocks in summer, grazing the woolly bands slowly through the broad meadows at the upper edge of the tree line.

Bob headed back to his horse but when he reached the spot where he had left him the animal was gone. The boy held on down the trail, assuming that his mount had taken the back track for home, as a horse which breaks

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loose in the hills almost invariably does. But there were no horse tracks pointing down-country on top of those his steed had left coming up a short time before. Bob returned to the spot where the horse had been tied and examined both flanks of the trail, determining that the runaway had veered to the left. For a short distance he worked out the trail from the patches of fresh earth and disturbed pine needles at points where the horse had evidently stepped on either the trailing bridle reins or neck rope and stumbled. Eventually he lost the trail and could not pick it up. He repaired to the shoulder of a spur that rose above the trees and from this point of vantage he examined the country below, scanning the open parks and meadows opening out among the trees. Sheep grazing was not permitted on this slope of the range but cows were summered in the Forest and he made out several scattered bunches grazing in the openings. He chose another spur and eventually located the runaway feeding in a sidehill glade. When he reached the horse he discovered that his gun,

a heavy .33 rifle, was gone from the saddle scabbard.

“You, Split Ear,” he admonished, “you onery flea-bit little rascal, what sort of antics did you perform in order to spill that rifle out of there? Must have been standing on your head.”

For two hours he rode back and forth through the country between the glade and the point where the horse had been tied, but eventually gave up hope of discovering the missing rifle and turned his horse toward home. A slender thread of smoke issued from the chimney of the little cabin as he neared it. An Airedale bounced up the trail to greet him and Battler fell in behind Split Ear, following the horse to the corral.

Wally Porter — once Buckskin of the Flint Hills — opened the cabin door and announced that a meal was on the table. After the evening meal had been completed and the dishes washed the two partners sat on the doorsill and watched the sun pitch down behind the western hills. The sense of being crowded for

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space in the swarming slums had once filled them with a longing for the open, and they had pictured themselves as roaming in vast forests, through the fastness of lofty mountain ranges or across the starlit wastes of the desert. Here was a touch of all three combined; for a desert of gray sage rolled endlessly away from their front door while the forested slopes of the hills rose just behind; and above the black sweep of spruce and lodgepole jungles lifted the ragged snow-capped peaks of the giant ranges.

Yet with all this they were not quite content for in the background of each boy's mind was the fear that this little ranch, round which all their hopes centered, might soon be lost to them. Raw furs had taken another stiff rise in price just before they marketed the heavy catch they had made in the Flint Hills and both boys had elected to head for the mountain country which was their goal instead of operating for another season on the Clearwater.

They had discovered that they could not exercise their homestead rights till after reaching

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legal age, so had cast about to find a tract of deeded land for sale at a price within their means. This isolated half-section in the flats at the mouth of Bobcat Canyon had seemed the ideal spot. The land carried first water rights for two hundred and forty acres, the entire flow of Bobcat Creek. The original entryman had done only sufficient work to permit his making final proof and receiving a patent to the two quarters. Most of the land was in raw sage, untouched by the plow, and the original cultivated tract of forty acres had lapsed back to the wild.

The boys had found that irrigated land was high-priced. But this little tract on Bobcat Creek was isolated; it was forty miles from a railroad point and the land was in a raw state. All those things had operated to hold down the price and the owner held it for four thousand dollars. It could be bought for one thousand dollars cash payment and the balance at one thousand dollars a year, with eight per cent. interest on deferred payments. Their combined capital, derived from the sale of their

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fur, totaled a trifle over sixteen hundred dollars, and they had decided that they could handle the little ranch. But the boys were minors, and while they could make a contract they could also move to have it voided at any time they chose. The owner of the land had pointed out this fact.

“Any time that you boys decided not to stand by the contract, I’d be compelled to hand your money back,” he said. “Then where’d I be? Maybe I’d have missed a chance to make an actual sale in between.”

But he had made a proposition that was satisfactory to all. Their work would be increasing the value of the land and he would be that much ahead in case they failed to fulfill their obligation. He incorporated in the contract a clause to the effect that in event of their failure to meet any deferred payment when due, he retained the right to void their agreement after ninety days by refunding any amounts paid on the contract up to that date. The partners had paid a thousand dollars of their slender capital as a first payment on the place.

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They sat in silence as the shadows deepened and obscured the valley. The crests of the hills seemed to draw closer as their outlines blackened and the last glints of light faded from the peaks. A great gray owl hooted from the rims of the canyon. A wild quavering yelp rose from the field. Another answered from well up the slope of the hills, a third from far out in the flat. Then a score of eerie howls rose in unison, the wild music of the desert choir, as the coyote nation voiced their exultation in the falling night.

"It would certainly be tough to have to move out and leave all this, Wally," Bob said. "This little ranch is all I want in the world and I'd hate to lose out on it now."

"We'd get our original payment back but that wouldn't seem like much if we lost the place," Wally agreed. "And we'd be out a year's work and all the money we've spent getting that little patch shaped up. It looked easy on the start; but we miscalculated by just ninety per cent. some way. We need a thousand dollars and need it bad, and after we pay

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up our odds and ends we'll have maybe a hundred left to see us through the winter — with a thousand-dollar payment overdue.”

He had stated their case exactly, for his assertion was not in the least overdrawn. A few implements had been acquired as part of the place. The purchase of two geldings and two mares, averaging eleven hundred pounds apiece, and which could be used for either work or saddle stock, two sets of harness and a cow had consumed the greater part of their remaining capital. They had worked early and late and had plowed out a forty-acre tract, piled and burned the sagebrush, leveled it and seeded it to crop. The patch had been seeded with oats and alfalfa in order that the faster growing grain might shade the tender shoots of young alfalfa. This crop had been cut for hay before the oats matured. Seed oats and alfalfa seed had been costly. The fences were in poor repair and they had been forced to string a quantity of new wire to keep range stock off the crop. The storekeeper at Grayson, the little railroad town where they traded, had car-

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ried them for their supplies until the crop could be marketed.

They had counted upon a good catch of fur during the winter but had found that this was a different sort of trapping than any they had learned in the Flint Hills. The coyotes had proved too cunning and had avoided their most artful sets. Occasionally they had caught one. A few bobcats had been taken in coyote traps and a number of badgers, but a badger pelt was worth little. They had found a few dens of big prairie skunks in the flats. All told, their catch had been but a fifth of that of the preceding year, netting a trifle over three hundred dollars. But it had helped. Their fifty tons of hay had been contracted to a cow outfit for six dollars a ton. After meeting their interest on deferred payments and settling their account at the store they had but a hundred dollars on which to winter; and the first payment of a thousand dollars was now past due. Their contract could be voided at the owner's will.

“Lawton said he wouldn't crowd us,” Bob

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said hopefully. "He'll extend the time for another year. Pretty decent of him, I'd call it. But if we can't raise the thousand in another twelve months we're through. We'll lose the place after increasing its value by two thousand dollars at least. We'll have to raise the money. I simply refuse to believe that we've got to give up this ranch."

The coyote chorus had been silent but now the wild howls broke forth once more, sounding from far and near along the foot of the hills. Battler rose and peered off in the night, his hackle fur fluffing angrily. The Airedale had small love for these yellow cousins of the wild. Bob waved an arm toward the howling horde.

"There's where we miscalculated," he announced. "Because we could catch a lot of small fur in a country that hadn't been trapped for years, and right under Kennedy's guidance, why we thought we could come out here and pinch the toes of the little yellow wolves — and we can't."

The soft bawl of a calf sounded from the

field and Wally slapped his partner on the back.

“Cheer up, old Top,” he said. “We’ve got our herd started, anyway.”

That one calf and the two colts, constituting the increase of their live stock, were highly prized by their owners.

Three days later Dickson, the ranger, rode down from the hills and headed his horse across the flat to where the boys were breaking out a strip of ground next to the cultivated tract. He slouched sidewise in the saddle as he talked and his eyes kept traveling back to the four horses hitched to the plow.

“Not very well matched as far as color goes,” he commented. “But matched for size — which is all that’s required.” The two mares were bays, Split Ear a pinto, and Warrior — named for that little horse that had dragged their first outfit through the Flint Hills — was a blue roan. “Do you ride ’em all?”

“Yes,” Bob said. “But mostly we straddle Warrior and Split Ear.”

“How long since you’ve been up in the

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peaks south of the sheep camp?" Dickson asked.

"Never have been there," Bob answered. "I haven't been much farther back than where we marked out those trees the other day. We've been too busy ever since we moved on the place to do much riding round."

The ranger nodded, but again his eyes slipped back to the roan gelding and the pinto.

"Sometimes, when a man is needing money, he'll do things he wouldn't consider when things were breaking right," Dickson commented. "There's been many a man decided he could pick up a few hundred easy dollars killing elk for their teeth. A pair of good bull tusks are worth twenty-five dollars. It don't take but a few days to accumulate quite a piece of wealth. But folks are down on that sort of thing now. They can understand a man's killing a critter for meat, even out of season, but when a big bull elk is shot down for his teeth and left to rot, why it's different again; they send folks up for a few years in the pen for tusk-hunting nowadays."

“They should be sent up,” Bob agreed. “Shooting elk for their teeth is pretty low-down.”

“Most of the elk summer farther up-country,” the ranger said. “But there’s always a scattering few, maybe a hundred head, that summer in the Hogback Range at the extreme head of Bobcat and Gravel Bar Creeks. That country lays eight or ten miles west of where the sheep outfit graze their woollies. You say you’ve never been up in there?”

“Never have,” Bob stated.

“Do you know the Cole boys that herd up at the sheep camp?” Dickson asked.

Both boys denied acquaintance with the Coles.

“They don’t know you either,” the ranger remarked. “Said they’d never heard your names before I mentioned them. I asked if they’d seen any one back in the hills and they said they’d seen two fellows riding a blue roan and a pinto a couple of times of late — picked ’em up with their glasses as they crossed out on some shoulder above timber line.”

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“Some one else,” Wally asserted. “It certainly wasn’t Bob and me.”

“Whoever it was has been killing elk for the teeth,” the ranger said. “At least the signs point to them. I noticed a bunch of magpies and ravens pitching down into a little gorge and went down to investigate. The bird flights, if you watch ’em careful, will always point out a carcass. I found an old bull that had been shot down for his teeth. Then I took to noticing the meat-eating birds to see where they congregated, and I found six more carcasses strung out for ten miles. A man can make a thousand dollars pretty easy in a few weeks by hunting elk for their teeth, but he’ll always get caught in the end. If those fellows operate up there any more I’ll get them sure. You’re a good pair of boys and I want to see you come out on top. I’d hate to see you trying that tusk-hunting game. I’m in the Forest Service and friendship can’t stand in a ranger’s way when any one starts looting in the Forest. Well, I’ll be sauntering on. Good luck.”

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He headed his horse out across the flat while the two boys stood gazing after him.

“Now do you suppose Dickson really figures we’ve been into that mess up there?” Wally asked. “More likely he was just mentioning it so we’d stay out of the hills with these two horses till after he’s caught the fellows that are riding round on mounts of the same color. He’s been a good friend to us ever since we hit the country.”

That night they sat as usual before the cabin and listened to the coyotes. There was a cold snap of frost in the air.

“Another six weeks and the fur will prime up,” Wally said. “Do you suppose we can learn to trap those coyotes this winter?”

Battler rose from the ground and peered off across country. Soon the boys could hear the steady hoofbeats of a trotting horse. There was a creak of wire as the horseman dropped the gate at the mouth of the lane. The Aire-dale disappeared, sliding silently away from the cabin. Suddenly Battler broke forth with a series of delighted yelps and a voice sounded

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from the night, a familiar voice which they had not heard for more than a year.

“Down, Battler!” the visitor ordered. “You, Battler! You’ll claw the clothes off me.”

Both boys jumped to their feet.

“Jack Kennedy!” Bob said.

They headed for the gate and Kennedy’s voice hailed them.

“Well, well!” he said. “Little old Rawhide and Buckskin. I can tell your walk in the dark.”

VIII

KENNEDY had been with them for a week and knew every detail of the place, for the boys had proudly conducted him over every acre of it.

“Your plans were all right,” he said as the three friends sat with their chairs tilted back against the cabin. “Only you forgot how hard it was to raise money to meet those payments. It’s not every year that a trap line will pay like yours did last year. Everything broke just right; fur prices high and the country hadn’t been trapped. Trapping coyotes is another sort of a game.”

“We know that now,” Bob agreed.

“Otherwise your calculations were correct,” Kennedy said. “Once you get the place shaped up it’s worth three times what you paid. When you get two hundred acres cleared and

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seeded to alfalfa you can cut from five to six hundred tons of hay every year, sell your surplus and put the money in cows. After you reach legal age you can each take a pasture homestead adjoining. There's open range all around for grazing your cows in the spring. You can get grazing permits on the Forest Reserve and summer your stock back in the Forest. Those possibilities are right here, just as you figured, but it takes time and money to clear and shape up a piece of raw sage. You'll pour in more cash than you can take out for the first few years; seed, lumber for head gates, living expenses, fencing — any number of little items will come up and add to the steady stream of expenses. For the first three years it will hustle you to raise enough crop to break even. Then there's the payments and interest to meet on top of it all. Where's the surplus coming from to buy those cows? If you'd had a little more capital, enough to pay cash for the place, or even two-thirds, and let the rest ride for three years, you'd have made it all right, but those pay-

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ments and interest may eat you up before you get the place cleared of brush and seeded to crop."

"We'll have to pay out somehow," Bob stated. "No other ranch would ever quite fill the place of this one."

"Maybe we can plan some way out," Kennedy said. "What I really came clear out here for was to take a camp hunt in the hills. I figured you'd soon be through breaking out ground and would be about ready to lay in your meat for the winter."

"We're through clearing brush for this year," Bob agreed. "We've broken out fifty acres next to the piece we seeded this spring. That's all we'll be able to seed down and handle next year. But we hadn't counted on taking a hunt, there's so much work to be done. Those house logs have to be cut and peeled before fur primes up."

"I'll show you how to save enough time on that one item to make up for the hunt," Kennedy promised. "There's a trick in all trades. You cut those logs now, or any time through

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the winter, and you'll find the bark growed so tight that it's just like part of the wood. You'll have to whittle it away with a draw-shave. That's a long, hard job for the pair of you. If you wait till next June the bark on the lodgepoles will slip. A June-cut lodgepole log will peel out like a banana. Then one of you can snatch the bark off as many logs in a day as the pair of you could peel now in a week. You need meat and lard for the winter, so we'll go to the hills and get it. I'll rent a few extra pack ponies to-morrow and the next day we'll start."

Two days thereafter a little pack outfit filed up Bobcat Creek and headed for the higher hills.

They found game trails threading the hills, affording good footing for their horses. The evening of the second day they made camp in a narrow valley. Just above the camp site the bottoms widened out into open meadows dotted with clumps of trees. Heavily timbered sidehills flanked the bottoms and lifted to rocky ledges that rose above timber line. It

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was an ideal camp site, for the horses could be turned out to graze on the meadows and if they should elect to make a break for home they would be forced to pass through the narrow neck near the camp and could easily be headed back up-country.

“There’s everything here to make it a good camp,” Kennedy said. “Wood and water, good grass for the horses and an easy place to hold ’em so they can’t make a break for home and leave us afoot.”

The two boys had fishlines wound round their hats and extra hooks fastened in their hatbands. They cut willow poles and repaired to the creek. In half an hour they returned with a dozen trout for supper.

“To-morrow we’ll hang up a piece of camp meat,” Kennedy predicted as they sat round the camp fire after the meal. “This is the best game country in America, except maybe parts of Alaska and the Yukon. There’s more varieties of big game within a hundred miles of here than in any other place I know. Antelope in the foothills, and up here there’s deer,

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elk, moose, mountain sheep and black, brown and grizzly bear."

A clear silvery bugle note sounded from far back in the hills. Another answered from the rim of the valley.

"That was an old bull elk that bugled first," Kennedy said. "An old herd boss likely. The other was younger and his voice had more of a squeal. We'll have meat in camp to-morrow. Now since Rawhide has lost his rifle there's only two guns in the outfit so we'll have to draw straws and see which two of us will hunt to-morrow. The more I think of it the less I see how that rifle could have slipped out of the scabbard; looks like it might have been stolen. But anyhow, two guns are enough, for one of us will have to tend camp every day to do the cooking and keep an eye on the horses."

The short straw fell to Kennedy, electing him as camp tender for the following day. Kennedy gave them a few points about the habits of different varieties of game.

"Bull elk and mule-deer bucks don't stay with the cows and does except in the running

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moon," he explained. "They summer high up near timber line by themselves. Now that the bulls are bugling you'll find an old herd bull bossing every band of cows, and the younger bulls hanging round by themselves. The old fellows whip the youngsters out of the herd. A buck deer don't stay with one band of does, but mills all through the hills from one bunch to the next. This time of year you won't find bighorn rams with the ewes, for the running moon of the sheep is later by several weeks. The ewes and lambs will be out in the peaks on the grassy plateaus and meadows but the old rams will be lower down. During the day you'll find 'em bedded down on the point of a rim-rock or on the shelf of a cliff where you wouldn't think a squirrel could find a foothold. Elk and deer rely mostly on their sense of smell to warn them. Their eyes are only fair, and if a man is standing quiet they can look right at him and not be able to make out for sure whether he's a man or a tree stump. But if they catch a whiff of scent they're off. A sheep hasn't much of a nose and he doesn't

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seem to hear over well, but he's got a pair of eyes that can't be fooled. An old ram can see the buttons on your shirt two miles away. When you try to get within range of elk or deer keep the wind on 'em every second; with a bighorn ram keep out of sight. You'll learn as you go along."

It was just turning gray in the east when the two boys left camp in the morning, heading up the valley and taking opposite sides of the stream. A mile above camp Bob chose a tributary creek and turned off to the left. He followed game trails that traversed down-timbered sidehills and rocky shoulders, finding the country littered with fresh elk sign, but he failed to catch a glimpse of the game. Once a covey of blue grouse flushed from a thicket and the roar of wings startled him. The hills were full of little red squirrels and these resented his intrusion, barking steadily as he stole silently along the game trails. By noon he had crossed out above the tree line. The creek headed in a basin just at timber line, fed by hundreds of trickles seeping from the perpetual snowbanks.

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Elk had been crossing frequently through a low saddle that formed a pass through the divide to the head of another creek, the trails worn deep and well defined.

Bob chose a point on the divide and for an hour he scanned the country with his glasses. The report of a heavy rifle drifted faintly to his ears and he knew that Wally had found game. He dropped down to the head of another creek that emptied into the larger stream on which they were camped, the confluence some three miles above the meadow. Elk sign was plentiful and once he crossed the trail of a few does and fawns, the prints of their tiny sharp-pointed hoofs showing plainly in the soft earth near a spring. Twice he found fresh bear tracks on the dusty sidehills devoid of vegetation and his nerves tingled at the sight of the broad prints in the dust. He had reached the bottoms where the stream had widened to join the main valley. All through the day he had been tense and alert, momentarily expecting to see game. Now a reaction set in.

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“Better luck to-morrow,” he said. “I’ll have to hustle if I reach camp before dark.”

He chose a game trail leading through a dense stand of lodgepole pine and swung along at a brisk pace. The hunt was over for the day. Suddenly he came to an abrupt halt and stared. A cow elk had stepped into the trail ahead of him. Another crossed within fifty yards. Tawny shapes moved in the timber on either flank. His feet had made no sound on the soft dirt of the trail and the wind was just right; he had walked almost into the middle of a band of cow elk that had risen from their beds to graze in the cool of the evening. His heart hammered wildly as he peered about for the bull that must be with the band. Even in his excitement he remembered that Kennedy had said that an elk’s eyes were indifferent, so he stood motionless. Several cows seemed to gaze straight at him but none detected his presence. The breeze eddied and a curling black-lash carried his scent to the cows. Big shapes sprang into motion and there was a

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clatter of hoof on down-logs as the animals hurdled the windfalls.

A huge bull leaped into sight and halted. The scent had not reached him and he seemed unable to determine the source of the danger. In a second he would be off. Bob's muscles seemed to cramp as he raised the rifle. The barrel wavered unsteadily as he lined down the sight. The bull was galvanized into action with the crash of the report. The boy fired again as the animal wheeled and disappeared in the timber.

An hour later a disappointed hunter turned up at camp. His drooping spirits revived as he sat down to a meal of elk liver and bacon. Wally had scored on a young spike bull. Kennedy chuckled as Bob explained his failure.

"Buck fever," he pronounced. "Most folks get it at first. You're usually pretty steady, Rawhide, but this surprise was too much and upset your nerves."

"If I'd only been expecting it," Bob regretted.

"It's always when you're least expecting it

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that you see game," Kennedy stated. "That seems to be almost a rule. You either run onto it just as you're leaving camp or maybe after you've hunted all day without seeing a hair. You give it up for a bad job and start back for camp — and jump your meat. Maybe you'll sit down on a log to rest and an elk or a deer will come sauntering along and nearly run over you. That's the way it goes. Better luck to-morrow. There's plenty of elk in the hills."

Bob left camp with the first streak of light, heading downstream. When he had covered a few hundred yards he stopped at the edge of a little park that opened out in the timber, his eyes trained on a rocky sidehill as he debated whether to climb up by that route and hunt on the ridges or to wait till he reached some gulch that led back through a break in the rims. He was prepared to make a strenuous day of it, having resolved to hunt far from camp and to keep on the move till sunset should drive him back. He decided to move on a bit farther before climbing the rims, took one step and

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stiffened with surprise. A mighty bull elk stood in the center of the open park. It seemed impossible that he could have failed to see the animal before. A massive pair of six-point antlers crowned the head of this monarch of the forest.

The rifle wavered as he raised it but he steadied it and did not press the trigger till the sights rested on the elk's shoulder. The roar of the shot filled the narrow valley and the old bull went down in his tracks. As he viewed his prize Bob decided that those massive antlers should one day adorn the walls of the new cabin they expected to build on the ranch.

Kennedy did not return till an hour after dark. The boys were vastly excited when he reported killing a black bear that would weigh three hundred pounds; after wounding it with the first shot he had followed it into a tangle of down-timber to finish the animal off with a second shot.

The old man chuckled and shook his head when the boys asked if the wounded bear had put up a fight.

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“There’s considerable misinformation about bears floating round,” he said. “A black or brown bear is as harmless as a pet coon. Not one out of a hundred will fight even if it’s wounded. The bear is a fine game animal and should be protected at certain seasons the same as other game, but the tales circulated by green hunters has made the bear an outlaw. Whenever a man sets up and tells you about a desperate battle he’s had with a black bear you can figure it’s a hundred-to-one shot that he’s a green hand that knows mighty little about bear.”

“But what about a grizzly?” Bob asked.

“The grizzly is a different proposition,” Kennedy said. “He’ll keep out of your way if he can, but once you wound a grizzly, he’s the most dangerous beast in America. A wounded grizzly won’t always fight, but most of ’em will, and when they do turn on a man he has trouble on his hands a-plenty. They’re hard to stop, once they go on the warpath, and can carry a pile of lead. They’ve got brains. I’ve known grizzlies to circle back and lay be-

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hind a windfall jam when a man was on their track, then rush him just after he'd passed and batter him before he could turn and shoot."

"Is there a chance of our getting a grizzly on this trip?" Bob asked.

"Not likely," Kennedy said. "The grizzly is almost extinct in the States, only a scattering few left in the western hills, and the most part of those are right up in this country, but they're so scarce that we're not apt to run onto one. If any cross through here I can maybe show you a track. I'd like you to see what size track an old grizzly makes. There was many a man mauled by grizzlies in the early days. A few more years and they'll all be gone."

Kennedy decreed that they should stop hunting for two days and care for their meat.

"It's a poor hunter that keeps on shooting till he's got so much game down that a part of his kill sours and spoils before he can take care of his meat. We're not that kind. To-morrow morning we'll start packing the meat into camp."

IX

THE two elk hides and the pelt of the bear were spread flat on the ground and the boys fleshed off every shred of meat, then poured several pounds of salt on the flesh side of each skin and worked it in. Kennedy fashioned a rack of poles some four feet from the ground and filled a kettle with hot brine. The elk meat had been boned and cut into strips four inches through by a foot or more in length.

“Now I’ll show you how to put up jerky,” Kennedy said when the arrangements were complete. “It will keep for a year and will go pretty good when you’re out of fresh meat.”

Each strip of meat was dipped for a second in the hot brine and suspended from the rack. When all the poles were full the rack was covered with a canvas tarpaulin and a slow smudge

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fire kindled below. No heat reached the suspended meat but the dense smoke eddied round it.

“Now for our lard,” Kennedy said. “That bear has a six-inch layer of fat. They’re always fat late in the fall just before they den up for the winter. Bear lard is soft, so we’ll add a little elk tallow to give it body.”

The fat was tried out over a slow fire, drained into pans and cooled at the edge of the creek. The elk tallow lent stiffness and body to the soft lard of the bear and when the mixture cooled it was dumped from the pans and stowed in pack panniers. This work was completed the second day.

“We’ve put up three hundred pounds of jerky and a hundred pounds of lard,” Kennedy estimated. “Now we’ll get some fresh meat to pack home; not very much, for it’s hard to keep this time of year, so we’ll maybe try for a sheep or deer and pass up the elk for right now. We’re each allowed two elk but we’ll wait till later on when cold weather sets in, and get the rest of our elk when we can

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quarter out the meat and hang it up to freeze. Then it will keep all winter.”

A light fall of snow covered the hills during the night but it was melting off when Wally and Kennedy left camp the next morning for a long hike to the high pinnacles of the sheep country. Bob tended camp and listened for the sound of shooting drifting down from the peaks but he heard no reports which might indicate that his companions had found sheep. Wally and Kennedy did not return till an hour after dark. They had seen ewes and lambs with their glasses but had failed to locate a big-horn ram. Wally had jumped a big mule-deer buck in a basin just at timber line and had killed his game at the second shot while the buck was running across the open bottoms.

The following morning Kennedy and Bob climbed the right-hand slope of the valley. Kennedy pointed out game sign as they traveled,—trees that had been gnawed by the sharp teeth of porcupines; rotten logs torn to pieces by bears in their search for grubs and insects. In an aspen thicket he pointed out a dozen

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trees on which the blackened lines in the white bark showed healed scars made in past years by the claws of bears that had climbed the trees. Near timber line they saw scores of feathery young spruce trees with the bark torn to shreds, the limbs crushed and broken, the needles turning brown under the sun. Kennedy explained that this was the work of bull elk and buck deer, the animals having horned these trees as they staged combats with imaginary rivals at the start of the mating moon.

They had allowed Battler to accompany them, for the Airedale's spirits had been at low ebb from being forced to remain in camp. Bob made the dog follow close behind him, ordering him back each time Battler attempted to range off by himself. They crossed out above timber line and hunted far back into the peaks in their search for sheep. Twice they sighted small bands of ewes and lambs but failed to discover a ram.

"We'll take a different route going back," Kennedy decided. He pointed to a basin at

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the head of a creek that flowed into the stream on which they were camped. "Maybe we'll run across a buck on the way in. You drop down into the basin and hunt the bottoms. I'll follow the right-hand ridge."

Bob reached the first scattering clumps of trees at the upper extremity of the basin. He had temporarily forgotten the dog, for his mind had reverted again to the missing rifle. It seemed impossible that it had slipped out of the scabbard. The horse had acted strangely, angling off across the hills instead of taking his back track for home. The gun might have been stolen and the horse led off to make it appear that the rifle had been lost while the animal was wandering about. Battler took advantage of his master's preoccupation to drop farther behind. He nosed the wind that floated down the left-hand slope and his neck roach bristled. A scent that made him both angry and uneasy had drifted to his nose. It was the scent of some great fighting beast and the Airedale's own hunting and fighting instincts were roused to a keen pitch. He turned off

up the left-hand slope and found the source of the scent. It was a trail some hours old and the scent was a trifle stale. He followed it into a heavy patch of timber and bristled with rage. A shift of breeze brought the warm body scent from just ahead. The great beast had bedded down in the heavy timber of the sidehill.

After crossing the clump of trees where Battler had left him, Bob found the timber less scattering with only occasional openings on the slopes. A hundred yards beyond him a solid belt of trees blocked the bottoms and he had nearly reached the edge of the timber when Battler opened up on the slope to the left. The dog's fighting squall was answered by a bellowing roar. The sound reached the ears of another man high up on the opposite ridge and on the instant Kennedy was running for a point which would afford a view of the narrow valley below him. He had heard that roar before and from his vast experience was able to picture exactly what had happened in the bottoms. The Airedale had jumped a grizzly, probably had nipped him from behind before

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the bear was aware of his presence, and the old fellow had turned to fight.

“That Rawhide will start shooting the second he sights that bear,” Kennedy panted. “And then there’ll be trouble a-plenty.” He hoped that Bob would fail to see the grizzly, but even as the wish formed in his mind he heard the bark of a rifle. The next second he reached the rims and the scene he had pictured was spread out far below him in actuality.

Bob had stopped in the open bottoms and turned his gaze uphill when the uproar started. A long open lane pierced the timber of the sidehill and a monster bear broke cover and started across. His dark underfur was shot through with long white guard hairs that gave the beast a grizzled, grayish appearance.

The Airedale followed close behind; he darted in and nipped the silvertip’s hind leg, leaping away as the bear whirled and aimed a mighty sweep of his forepaw at this persistent tormentor.

The boy touched the trigger and the old grizzly fell and rolled a dozen feet downhill.

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The animal regained his feet and raked his claws savagely across the wound in his side, then sighted the figure a hundred yards below him in the bottoms and charged headlong down the hill. Bob shot twice, lining his sights on the breast of the charging bear, but the huge grizzly did not even waver in his frenzied rush. The Airedale raged hysterically behind him and twice the dog slashed the animal's rump. It seemed to the boy that the beast bore down on him with the speed of the wind. He was vaguely aware that from somewhere above him a rifle was barking at the rate of one shot a second. From far up on the rims Kennedy emptied his gun in eight seconds, although he knew that only a head shot or spine shot would halt the grizzly's rush. His last shot smashed the animal's hip, but the bear merely rolled over once and held on.

Bob worked the lever, throwing in a shell for his fourth shot, and as he lined down the sights the grizzly loomed within thirty yards, his hair on end and a bloody froth dripping from his open mouth. Then Battler threw himself



BATTLER THREW HIMSELF IN THE PATH OF THE
CHARGING BEAR. *Page 171.*

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square in the path of the charging bear in a desperate effort to check the rush. The big silvertip dealt him a slap with a mighty forepaw and the sidewise sweep threw the Airedale thirty feet through the air. Bob squeezed the trigger during the split second that the bear's speed was lessened. The great beast went down and his momentum carried his body to the foot of the slope, the vast carcass buckling loosely like some half-filled sack. The heavy slug had drilled the bear full between the eyes. It seemed to Bob that an hour had elapsed since the grizzly had broken cover on the slope, but it had been scarcely ten seconds since his first shot was fired. His first concern was for Battler, who had crawled back to maul the dead bear.

Up on the rims Kennedy sat down limply on a rock.

"Got him," he said. "The kid bored him through the skull as Battler slowed him up." He rose and started down the slope. "Battler is on the move again, so that blow didn't kill him, but he'll need some patching up."

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He found Battler with three broken ribs and the skin of one side badly torn. Bob volunteered his shirt and Kennedy drew the edges of the rents together and tied the shirt round the dog's body, knotting the makeshift bandage along his back. Battler occasionally whined from the pain of his injuries but his fighting spirit was still intact even though his hide was tattered and he returned to take one last bite at the grizzly.

"We'll sew him into a canvas jacket when we get back to camp," Kennedy said. "He'll be all right in a week."

"Old Battler saved my bacon," Bob said. "I'll never forget that."

"And the old rascal stirred up the whole mess to start with and nearly got you killed," Kennedy answered. He rested his hand on Bob's shoulder. "Son, you'll never have a closer squeak than you did right now. One of your shots went straight into his chest as he was coming down the hill. He'd have died of that shot in just about one minute but the damage a grizzly can do in sixty long seconds is

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plenty. I've known a grizzly shot through the heart to maul two men in the thirty seconds he had left to live."

"He came down that hill like a streak," Bob confessed. "I didn't know any living thing could move that fast."

"A bear looks clumsy and slow," Kennedy said. "Maybe you've heard these yarns about some man outrunning a bear for half a mile. You can put it down that the man who was spinning the story hadn't seen a bear except in a zoo, lumbering back and forth in a cage. A bear looks right awkward but he can bounce through the hills like a rubber ball and travel faster in rough country than the champion sprinter can run on a level track. This old fellow covered that hundred yards after you shot in just about eight seconds. You did good steady shooting, Son, but you were lucky to pile him up."

He prodded the still form of the bear with his toe.

"He's a monster, that fellow," he stated. "It's likely he's fifty years old. You want to

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save that pelt. You may never run across another and in a few years from now you'd rather have his hide as a reminder of this fight than the few dollars you'd get by selling it now. Well, I expect this winds up our hunt."

X

INSTEAD of returning to the ranch with the others Bob had stopped over in the lodgepole valley where the ranger had marked out his logs. In three days he had cut and trimmed the hundred young trees which were to serve for corral poles and stack-yard fences. When the heavy snows blanketed the hills the poles could be snaked down the trail to the bottoms. He had elected to take Kennedy's advice and wait till the following June to cut the heavier house logs at a time when the bark of the lodgepole would slip. When he returned to the ranch he found Kennedy sorting over a bunch of a hundred number-four traps. All were of the heaviest construction, solidly bolted, and weighing four pounds apiece.

"These cost a dollar apiece if you buy them new," Kennedy said. "But I picked these up at less than half price. Some of the pans need

fixing and some of the chains, but I'll tinker them up. How would you boys consider taking me on for a partner for a winter of wolfing and split both the expenses and the catch three ways?"

Kennedy's suggestion seemed to lift a weight from Bob's mind. With Kennedy on the job to show them the tricks of outwitting the coyotes their way would be easier; their share of the catch might bring in enough to meet the payment that was overdue on the contract.

"Beef prices are breaking," Kennedy explained. "So Brown and I decided not to feed out a bunch this year. If we bought a bunch of feeders this fall, the way the market is dropping, we'd maybe have to turn them for less than we paid after wintering them through. Anyway, I'm about due for a winter on the trap line, so we'll give it a trial."

The old trapper had gathered the teeth of two broken hay rakes and he straightened these and made twenty-inch stakes of the slender steel rods, pointed at one end and knobbed at

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the other. He wove into each trap chain a ring made of several laps of heavy wire, the opening just large enough to hold the slender steel stakes without allowing the knob to pass through.

“Rake teeth make the best trap stakes,” he explained. “Now there’s several angles to wolfing besides knowing how to set traps. A coyote pelt is only worth about four to five dollars, average. We ought to be able to arrange for enough bounty money to equal the price of the pelt and make double the amount on the same-sized catch. Every big sheep ranch or cow outfit in the country will be willing to pay from twenty-five to fifty cents a head for all coyotes or cats caught anywhere near their home range. There’s a State bounty of a dollar and a half on each scalp and a Stock Association bounty of a dollar per head. Now I’ll ride round for a few days and visit the big outfits all along the foot of the hills and find how much each one will add to the bounty.”

The fourth day after Kennedy’s departure the boys were engaged in digging a root cellar

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in which to store their vegetables and canned goods for the winter. A man came down the trail from the hills on foot. He carried a rifle and walked with a slight limp.

"It's Dickson," Wally stated. "Maybe his horse spilled him and left him afoot."

"He wouldn't quit till he'd caught him again," Bob dissented.

"But he walks like his leg had been in a smash, maybe jammed against a tree, so he couldn't follow his horse."

They walked out to meet the ranger. Dickson's right trouser leg was caked with blood below the knee.

"This your gun?" he demanded briefly, pointing to the initials carved in the stock.

"Yes," Bob said, reaching out for the rifle. "How did you run across that? And what's wrong with your leg? Come on up to the house and tell us about it while I get you a bite to eat. I'm right glad to see that gun. I lost it a few weeks ago up in the hills."

"I expect you wish now you had lost it," the ranger observed. "Too thin, Bob; it won't

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wash. This is not on the Reserve, so I can't make an arrest. I'll have to swear out a warrant and have the sheriff come get you if you don't choose to go in with me."

"If you want me for anything you won't need the sheriff," Bob answered. "But what's all this about? You're joking, I reckon."

"If you think it's a joke to shoot a man's horse out from under him with a spring-gun and take a nick out of his leg, why then your idea of a frolic is different than mine."

"A spring-gun," Bob said. "Set with this gun?"

"Set on the trail half a mile beyond where you were camped cutting poles a few days ago," the ranger stated. "With a vine stretched across six inches above the trail. But I guess you know. If I'd happened to have been walking and leading my horse that slug would have caught me in the armpit instead of nicking my leg and drilling my horse through the shoulders."

"But why should I set a gun for either you or your horse?" Bob queried.

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“You didn’t, of course,” the ranger returned. “You set it for elk. It’s against the State laws to set a spring-gun anywhere in the hills. It might have been different if you’d planted it off in some pocket where a man don’t get once in a year, but no one but a green hand in the hills would stick it down on a Forest Service pack trail that’s traveled an average of once every week. I passed up that tusk-hunting deal a while back, for there was a good chance that I might be mistaken; and you boys had worked like two slaves trying to make both ends meet. I gave you the benefit of the doubt, for I wanted to see you make good. It’s cost me a good horse. Maybe after you’ve paid a stiff fine you’ll learn a few things.”

The ranger was in no mood to listen to Bob’s explanation of having lost the gun weeks before. He had been jarred by the fall, had lost a good horse and had walked several miles with a wounded leg. A long ride to Grayson loomed ahead.

“Come on, if you’re going with me,” he said, waving Bob’s explanation aside. “It’s your

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privilege to refuse and I'll send out the sheriff. I suppose you'll lend me a horse."

Half an hour later Wally stood and watched Bob ride away with the ranger.

"I don't know yet just how all this happened," he said to Battler. "But Bob didn't do it and some one else did. That much is certain. I haven't the faintest sort of an idea who it was, but some day I'll know."

The next morning Bob appeared in a Justice Court in Grayson to answer to the charge of setting a spring-gun. He had no theory as to how the gun might have been set so attempted no explanation, merely stating the fact of the rifle having been lost or stolen a few weeks before. Dickson's ill-humor had largely worn off during the night. He did not add the killing of elk for their teeth to the charge and no mention was made of it. The Justice imposed a fine of one hundred dollars and admonished Bob against such criminal recklessness as setting a spring-gun and endangering human life. He explained that Dickson had interceded in Bob's behalf and asked that a

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light fine be imposed instead of binding him over for trial, the consequences of which might be more serious and would most certainly prove more expensive. The boy knew that the fine was a light one in view of the fact that he was supposed to have killed a horse and wounded a man while violating a law. The fine would wipe out their bank account, but he knew no other way than to pay it.

There was a clatter of hoofs in the single street of the little sun-baked town and Wally and Kennedy dropped from their horses before the door.

An hour later the two boys rode out of town. Kennedy and the ranger followed a few yards behind. Bob's case had been appealed.

"Maybe I acted a mite too quick," the ranger confessed to Kennedy. "But I was considerable stirred up when that gun went off — and Bob couldn't give any explanation except that he'd lost it."

"Which he did," Kennedy asserted. "I know that for a fact. If he'd set that gun himself he'd have had a plausible yarn to tell

about how he didn't. But he was so dazed that he only kept repeating that the rifle had been lost. No man but a rank idiot or a thug would plant a spring-gun on that trail, and Bob's got brains. Some one either set that plant for Bob or to try and make him trouble."

"But who?" the ranger demanded. "There's nobody up in there."

"I can't even make a guess as to the party or his reasons," Kennedy admitted. "On the surface it appears downright improbable. I'd have thought the same way you did — only I happen to know different. The trial won't be till spring and in the meantime I'll find out who there is in the country with a grievance against Bob. Then we'll check him up."

The ranger turned off and Kennedy joined the boys. The following day Kennedy and Bob rode back into the hills and pitched a temporary camp near the spot where the spring-gun had been set.

"If this was back in the Flint Hills we'd know who to look for," Bob asserted. "We'd know it was the Neils."

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“The Neils aren’t back in the Flint Hills now,” Kennedy said. “Not with a warrant out against them for robbery. They haven’t been seen since we raided their camp in the swamp. They know this country and might have jumped back out here, but the Neils aren’t the kind to take a chance just for the sake of an old grudge. They’d have to see money in it for them.”

A camp fire was kindled and the two sat on a down-log.

“Now let’s go over this,” Kennedy said. “And to-morrow we’ll ride for some sign. Who was up in here about the time your horse was led off and the rifle lifted?”

“Not a soul that I know of,” Bob answered. “The nearest were the men up at the sheep camp. That’s twenty miles. I never saw them and don’t know them at all.”

“This side is closed to sheep,” Kennedy said. “The herders wouldn’t be down this slope at all. Their home ranch is way off across the Redpin Spur, where the main range swings off to the north, sixty odd miles from

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here. They wouldn't have any interest in you. That lets them out. Has any one ever tried to buy out your ranch?"

Bob shook his head.

"It can't be some outfit that wants to see you lose out so you won't encroach on their range," Kennedy said. "They wouldn't work it this way. There's a hundred easier methods a big outfit could use to break you and get you out of the country. If you were homesteading it might be that; but your place is deeded land, and some one will own it, anyway. That cancels that lead. It can't be anything but a personal matter, some one that holds a grudge against you. Who runs their cows up here summers and grazes most of the stock on the range round near you?"

"The McIntyres," Bob informed. "Their ranch is on the next creek west of Bobcat, about twelve miles from our place. The two McIntyre boys are the best friends we've got. They're about our own age."

"Their outfit must have riders through here now and then to look over the cows that they

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throw up here to summer on the Forest," Kennedy said.

"Not often," Bob returned. "The cows never cross over the divide but stay on this slope and they comb them out in the fall. But they had them all off the Forest before that gun was set."

"Whoever set it there right next to your camp was out after you, in which case Wally would pull out of the country, or if any one else got hurt by the plant it would get you boys in trouble. Some one wants to get rid of you, but it's mighty indefinite who or why. Tomorrow we'll look the ground over."

The next day they scoured the hills near the spot and as they rode Kennedy read the signs of the forest floor. No disturbance of pine needles or displacement of rock was too slight to challenge his interest. It was well into the afternoon before he found a sign that proved of possible importance. He pulled up his horse and pointed to a groove in the pine needles that carpeted the ground.

"Some one's been picking up dead sticks for

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a fire," he asserted. "Get off and we'll prospect around."

There were a number of grooves where small sticks had formerly rested.

"Whoever it was didn't want to use an ax so he picked up scraps," Kennedy said. "It was done this summer, since the snow melted off. Otherwise these little grooves would have been filled in solid. But it was done some time back, for a few pine needles and trash have partway covered them up."

At one edge of the little rocky gulch they found the ashes of the fire.

"He laid out here all night," Kennedy informed. "Between the rock wall and the fire, so the rocks would reflect the heat back. That means he didn't have a bed roll. The fire was built before we had that little shift of snow while we were hunting; the ashes have been packed down by moisture; so he didn't camp here the night the spring-gun was set; more likely about the time the rifle was lifted. His horse is a big one — wore number two shoes." Kennedy pointed to the horse tracks around

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the camp. "Here's where he hung his saddle blanket over this down-log. It's littered with white hair. He was riding a white horse or a very light gray. There's a picket pin out in that little open park where he picketed his horse for the night. It's right queer I can't find as much as a heel print to see what sort of footgear he wore. Looks certain he'd leave a few tracks round the spring or in some bare patch of dirt, but it seems that he stepped mighty light. Now it's a good bet that whoever camped here lifted your gun and later came back and set it. What one of your friends rides a white horse?"

"None that I know of," Bob said.

"A pinto with a white patch on his back?"

Bob shook his head.

"Well, maybe we'll pick up some other sign," Kennedy said. But after thoroughly scouting the country for another full day they had failed to find another trace of the man. They broke camp and returned to the ranch.

XI

THE cold days had come and fur was prime. The low country was free of snow but the higher hills were one solid glare of white when Kennedy and the boys rode from the ranch to throw out their first trap line. Each one led a pack horse loaded with traps and bait. The bait was in the shape of big strips of horse meat with the hide left on, averaging ten pounds apiece.

“Don’t spare bait in trapping coyotes,” Kennedy counseled. “Round every outfit there’s an occasional animal that gets crippled up and has to be killed. Now that we’re wolfing we’ll be needing bait and every rancher will notify us when they have a horse or beef critter killed.”

Just outside the fence he chose an opening in the sagebrush. A space of twenty yards across was devoid of vegetation except for an occasional tuft of grass or a weed.

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Kennedy swung from his horse and stood in one spot without moving about. With his trapping ax he dug a triangular bed for the trap, making the excavation a trifle over two inches deep. He inserted a steel stake in the small wire ring he had fashioned and drove it to the head in the bottom of the hole, then placed the trap in the bed, both springs bent well back. He produced a small piece of canvas cut a trifle larger than the spread of the trap jaws.

“Most trappers put cloth or paper across the whole trap and cover it,” he explained. “But that makes considerable weight for the springs to lift. This is a scheme of my own.” He placed the canvas over the pan and under the jaws. A slit four inches long had been cut in the cloth at one side. This fitted over the dog, leaving it free to work. Then he covered the trap with the earth removed from the hole, adding a top layer of dust. The gaping jaws lay flat, less than half an inch below the surface. He made a similar set six feet away and between the two traps he placed a large chunk

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of bait, wiring it to a stake driven out of sight in the ground. Not once had he stepped out of the space between the two traps. When the sets were complete he blotted out the small patch of tracks with a piece of sagebrush and swung to his horse. Leaning from his saddle he touched out every remaining footprint with the tip of the brush, then fanned the surface dust into curling eddies that settled back over the spot till the surface was uniform. No man could point out the site of the traps.

“You can’t fix up a nice set when there’s only one inviting lane to the bait; not for a coyote,” Kennedy explained as they rode on. “He just naturally refuses to go into it. The best sort of a set is right out in the open. He’ll know there’s a trap somewheres close for he’s too smart to think that bait happened there by accident, but he figures he’s clever enough to spot the trap and get away with your meat. There’s an even break that he’ll do it, but there’s also a good chance that while he’s messing around he’ll get himself caught.”

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Kennedy had set the traps with his bare hands and gave his reasons.

“Don’t be misled by these fellows who advise you to scent up your traps and wear scented gloves to blot out the man scent,” he counseled. “A dog can follow an animal’s track at a run if it’s hot, or work it out slow when it’s a few hours old, but he’ll cross a cold track without knowing. Common sense will tell you that the same thing applies to the scent of your hands on a trap. The man smell will freeze out overnight. Any scent that’s foreign to the range and that lingers on round your trap will only make it a certainty that a coyote will spot it. The man who tells you about smoking your traps and scenting up your gloves and your boot soles is no wolfer; he just thinks he is, but you’ll find he never brings in many pelts.”

The first line was to be strung along the base of the hills. Numerous gulches broke back into them and the floors of these little canyons were covered with a heavy growth of sage and occasional clusters of cedars and cottonwoods.

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Kennedy turned aside and rode two hundred yards up a gulch.

“Bobcats will work these brushy bottoms for rabbits,” Kennedy said. “So will the coyotes. Now I’ll show you a cat set.”

He chose a spot where the gulch pinched down to a narrow neck, selecting a natural bait pen where an opening some three feet long by two in width showed among the trunks of a cedar thicket. A few sticks completed the pen and he set a trap at the mouth of it, a piece of bait wired in the rear. From one of the pack panniers he produced a sack filled with scraps of rabbit skins and fastened several strips on the brush where they would flutter in the wind. The trap was lightly covered with the trash that had accumulated under the cedars and sagebrush.

“A coyote wouldn’t go near that set,” he informed the boys. “But a bobcat is as near brainless as any fur critter I know. He’ll step right on an uncovered trap two thirds of the time. The only trouble is to attract his attention. A cat hunts mostly by sight and he

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can't smell a bait at ten feet that a coyote would wind at a hundred yards. These rabbit skins fluttering will catch a cat's eye as he comes through this neck and he'll get to poking about and find the bait. Then he's our cat, for he'll step right into the trap."

Kennedy made two more sets for coyotes while the boys looked on and noted every detail. Cow trails threaded the dips and saddles of the ridges and he selected open spots in these natural crossings or on exposed slopes never far from some cow path. In such places the wind had a clear sweep and would scour off the snow after each storm before it had time to melt and soak the surface earth with the consequent freezing-down of the traps.

At the next site he instructed Bob to make a set of his own, then rode on with Wally, leaving him to set a trap in the dip of a ridge half a mile beyond while he rode on to make a third set himself. By this system of overlapping they were able to cover a big stretch of country. Nightfall found them a trifle over twenty miles from the ranch with thirty good

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sets strung out behind them. A deserted log cabin stood near a spring-creek at this point and made a good overnight camp.

The following morning they held on for five miles along the foot of the hills, then swung away from them and circled back toward the cabins. This second line, when completed, was in the form of a pear-shaped loop with the cabin as a base. The third day they headed back toward the ranch, paralleling their route of the first day but keeping some five miles out from the foot of the hills.

All this was to constitute one man's trap line for the winter. Kennedy appointed Bob to take over this route while he and Wally should throw out a similar string of traps the opposite way from the ranch. Bob could ride one day to the cabin and stay overnight, run the short loop beyond on the second, which would give his horses a rest, and ride the outer string back to the ranch the third day.

Bob packed a bed roll and a supply of food which would be left at the overnight cabin. His hopes were high as he neared the first set

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but it was undisturbed. A dead magpie graced the cat trap up the gulch and he extracted the bird and reset the trap. The bait at the third set had been stolen by a coyote that had located one trap, raised it sufficiently to expose the end of a spring and decamped with the bait. The next trap held a badger and the animal had dug up the earth to the depth of ten inches within the radius which the trap chain allowed him to range. The boy killed the badger and changed the set to a spot two hundred yards farther on. Not until almost a third of the line had been covered did he find a coyote fast in a trap. It was a big old dog coyote and the torn earth round the spot testified to the fact that he had made a strenuous fight to escape. These hill coyotes were much larger than those of the prairie country farther east, their fur longer and finer and the most of them had a dark strip down the back.

A huge bobcat waited for him in the next trap and greeted him with a spitting snarl as he dropped from his horse. The rest of the

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line yielded but one pelt and he reached the overnight cabin with two coyotes, a cat and a badger. Bob rode the short loop the next day and on the third took the outer line back toward the ranch. He found that Wally and Kennedy had reached home an hour before his arrival, having completed a trap line for Wally. Bob displayed his catch of a badger, two cats and three coyotes.

Bob spent every third night at the home ranch, meeting Wally there as his partner came in from his three-day round of the opposite line. Kennedy had thrown out two loops extending out into the flats and he rode out one string every alternate day, spending the off days at the ranch. On the nights when the three were together they compared notes and experiences of the trap lines.

The two McIntyre boys learned that all hands were in from the trap line every third night and they frequently rode over to spend an evening, riding the long miles back to their own ranch in the night. Wally and Bob were working early and late at their traps in order

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to raise the money which would enable them to pay out on the ranch and remain in these hills far from the city. Art and Joe McIntyre, having always lived on a ranch in this country, were working as hands for their father to raise the money which would enable them to go and make a start in the city.

“By next spring we’ll likely have enough funds to leave,” Art McIntyre announced one evening.

“And by next spring we’re hoping to have enough funds to stay,” Bob said. “I don’t see why any one would ever leave this country to live in some crowded town.”

“And I don’t see why any one would be simple-minded enough to leave a good town and come out here to live in the sagebrush and cactus,” Art countered. “You work early and late on a ranch; plowing, irrigating, putting up hay and riding the range of summers; cutting and hauling wood, fixing fence and feeding stock of winters. That’s life on a ranch.”

“In the city you’ll hole up in one little room,” said Bob. “You’ll work long hours six

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days every week, regardless of season, and worry yourself sick wondering if your pay check at the end of the week will cover your room rent and a meal ticket at some third-rate beanery. Maybe every six months you've saved enough to buy a new suit of clothes and a necktie. Nothing but windows and stone walls and hot pavements; nothing green but transplanted trees and little patches of lawn that you can't step on without getting arrested. Out here you've got the whole world to range on."

"Yes," Art agreed. "A whole world with nothing in it but solitude, sagebrush and sheep. You won't find those in the city."

"No," said Bob. "Back there you'll find nothing but grief."

Neither pair of boys could quite understand the opposite longings of the others and many friendly arguments resulted. It seemed to Bob that no one could possibly give up the free life of the open for the hustle and strife of the city; for the spell of the sage country and the giant hills had claimed him. Win-

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ter had tightened down in earnest and the range was gripped by bitter cold. Some days he rode his trap line in a whirl of soft white flakes, the next in a screeching gale as the after-storm winds tore at the blanket of snow, scouring it from the open and piling it in great drifts in the gulches or down-wind from the heavier thickets of sage. There were gray days when leaden clouds were low-flying and particles of sleet hurtled on the wings of the wind and stung his cheeks. On such days all living things sought cover; there was no sign of life; no sound save the shriek of the gale and the hiss of wind-driven sleet in the sagebrush. There were days of calm when not even a breeze rustled the bare limbs of the cottonwoods in the gulches, when the sun shed a white light that was quite without warmth but seemed instead to help drive the bitter frost deeper into his bones. There were times when the meat supply was running low and he would take a day off from the duties of the trap line and hunt far back into the hills. Here the solid white drifts lay banked deep in the tim-

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ber. Occasional chinooks broke the spell of winter, their hot winds fanning the hills and thawing the surface of the drifts, bringing false promises of spring that were soon crushed out as winter clamped down once more and reclaimed her own. And Bob loved every phase of it, felt himself a part of it all, his moods varying to accord with every shift of nature.

Their catch mounted higher day by day. Every cat or coyote would add at least nine dollars to it, for almost every outfit in the vicinity had agreed to pay a small individual bounty on every scalp. The total bounty money would equal the average price of a pelt. The main run of the catch consisted of coyotes, about four to every cat. Badgers numbered about the same as the bobcats but their pelts would bring less than two dollars apiece. Occasionally a fox strayed down from the high bald ridges of the peaks and stepped in a coyote trap. Most of the foxes were reds but Wally returned from one round with the pelt of a very dark cross fox which would bring fifty dollars on the market.

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As the winter advanced the remaining coyotes grew more and more trap-wise and their catch was accordingly lessened but Bob knew that with even fair success the balance of the season their two-thirds' share of the catch would bring almost enough money to meet the overdue payment. But through it all a mist of uneasiness hung over him.

Their contract could now be voided at the will of the owner and Lawton had made only a verbal agreement to extend the time. If he had a good opportunity to make a more advantageous sale he might change his mind and void their agreement by returning their original payment and sell the ranch to some other party. Even provided they met the payment it would leave them without money for current expenses to seed down the new clearing to hay. And on top of it all was the charge hanging over him. It would cost a neat sum to fight the case even if he were cleared of the charge; and Kennedy had been unable to find a single scrap of evidence which would clear him.

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Kennedy had carefully sized up every man in the vicinity and had attempted to pick the one who would benefit by getting the boys out of the country but his investigations resulted in a blank. The few scattered neighbors were universally friendly toward the two boys and Kennedy was obliged to confess to himself that he had failed in his quest to find proof that Bob had not set the spring-gun.

In February Bob came in with a coyote hide that showed rubbed spots. Wally returned from his line with two of the same grade of pelts.

“The season is over,” Kennedy stated. “Coyotes are among the first critters to show rubbed pelts in the spring. Another week and our whole catch would be shedders. On the next round we’ll spring all our traps.”

XII

THE drifts lay deep in the higher hills and would linger there till midsummer. After the trapping season was over the boys turned their attention to the poles Bob had cut the preceding fall, snaking them down the snow-covered pack trail to the bottoms. A solid new corral was built near the house, the creek running through one corner of it. By the time this work was completed the flats had cleared of snow, except for a few drifts in the gulches, and the frost was out of the ground.

The forty they had seeded the year before turned faintly green and the three friends walked down to the field to inspect this first evidence of spring.

“You’ve got a good heavy stand of alfalfa on this forty,” Kennedy said. “It ought to cut a hundred tons of hay this year. You’ll get two full cuttings; maybe a third.”

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The piece they had broken out the past fall adjoined the alfalfa meadow.

“You’ll get that seeded to oats and alfalfa this spring,” Kennedy said. “And cut it over for hay just before the oats ripen. That will give you another forty tons or more. If you get as good a stand of alfalfa on that piece as you did on this forty you’ll be putting up a big cut of hay next year.”

Bob nodded but his mind was concerned with another angle of the problem. The boys’ share of their winter’s catch of fur, including bounty, had brought within a few dollars of enough to meet the first payment on their contract. If they attempted to seed down the new ground at once it would be costly and leave them several hundred dollars short.

“Maybe it would be better to turn the money over to Lawton and let the seeding of this piece slide for another year,” Bob said. “It will leave us flat broke but the storekeeper at Grayson will carry us for what few supplies we need until we cut our hay.”

“Better get it under crop,” Kennedy ad-

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vised. "If Lawton insists on a payment before you sell your hay I'll lend you whatever little difference there is between what you've got and what you owe."

Kennedy saddled a horse and rode away from the ranch. Two days later he returned and drove thirty head of cows into the corral.

"That's all young she stock," he said. "They'll all calve this spring. The beef market is down now and I picked these up cheap. I've got a deal to put up to you. You boys run this little bunch of cows for four years and we'll split the bunch in half."

"But how will we pay you for our share?" Wally asked. "We're in too deep now."

"There's times when a deal can be made without money and yet be profitable to both parties," Kennedy said. "This is one of that kind. You've got good free spring and fall range all around you; you can get permits to summer stock on the Forest and you've got hay for winter feed. You'll have more hay every year—but you haven't the money to buy cows. I can buy the cows but haven't the feed,

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and besides I don't want to tie myself down with running a ranch of my own. I'd rather be free to wander around. I'll buy the cows and you furnish the feed. You can sell all your hay but just enough to winter them through. At the end of four years we'll split the bunch in half. I'll have made a profit and you'll be in the game for yourself with a nice bunch of cows. There's been many a deal like this made on the range and if both parties play square it works out in good shape. If you were in a country where you had to feed under fence the whole year you couldn't afford to take on this deal, but out here you'll have free grass for seven months out of the year."

For an hour the two boys sat on the top bar of the corral and feasted their eyes on the little bunch of cows.

"We'd have lasted about three weeks that first fall if Kennedy hadn't run across our camp in the Flint Hills and showed us the ropes," Bob said. "Now he's trying to pull us out of this hole too; and it looks like he will if we can hang on for another year. But

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there's so much we hadn't figured on." He shook his head, remembering that his trial was but three weeks away. "I suppose after that's over we'll find that those fellows are killing elk again for the teeth and I'll be suspected of tusk hunting."

Kennedy had come up behind them and overheard this last remark.

"Tusk hunting," he said. "Who is killing elk for the teeth? Say that over again, Son."

Bob gave the details as the ranger had given them to him.

"Didn't I tell you?" he finished.

"No," Kennedy said. "You didn't tell me. After all the pains I've gone to, teaching you to read sign and explaining how every scratch or overturned rock means something in the hills, why you just go and forget to mention the one thing that would have got me lined out on who set that spring-gun. I'm surprised at you, Son, for a fact."

"But that happened way in south of the sheep camp," Bob said. "Likely some men

just riding through. They never showed up again."

"No," Kennedy said. "Naturally they wouldn't — not if my guess is correct. It's my surmise that they never even showed up the first time. Maybe now I've got something to work on. Do you know any outfit with a pair of horses the same color as yours?"

"There's quite a few pinto horses around," Bob said. "But I don't know of another blue roan."

"Now it's a safe bet those fellows up at the sheep camp killed those elk — way back in pockets where no one would be apt to run onto the carcasses. Then when the ranger asked them if they'd seen any men in the hills they remarked about seeing two riders on a blue roan and a pinto. It came up perfectly natural, especially when they told Dickson they'd never heard of you boys. But they had. They wanted to cause you some trouble. Otherwise they'd have invented some horses that were commonplace in looks and couldn't be traced."

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“ But why should they want to stir up trouble for us? ” Bob demanded. “ We’ve never even seen them or been within fifteen miles of their camp.”

“ The reason don’t show on the surface,” Kennedy said. “ But it’s there. Sounds sort of improbable, don’t it? But who set that spring-gun? We’ve never found a reason for that, but we know it was set. The man that invented the yarn about those horses was the one that set the gun. It’ll have to work out like that. We’ve sifted down every other lead and met a blank wall. Saddle up and we’ll ride over to Dickson’s.”

Kennedy explained the situation to the ranger.

“ It looks unreasonable that those sheepmen would have any point in doing all this,” he confessed. “ But it’s dead certain some one set that spring-gun right next to Bob’s camp, and it’s logical to suppose that he’s the same one that told you about seeing riders back where those elk were shot down for their teeth. It’s got to be him.”

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“ Well, maybe,” the ranger admitted doubtfully. “ But what’s his idea? ”

“ Bob’s gun was stolen the day you marked out his logs,” Kennedy said. “ Then you rode on to the sheep camp. Try and think back. Were all the men there when you got there, or was one of them missing? ”

“ Let’s see,” the ranger reflected. “ The two herders were out with two different bands, opposite ways from the camp. The cook wasn’t there to tell me which way to look for the herders; for I remember I had to locate them by the sound of the sheep — easy enough because you could hear ’em blat for three miles. I stayed with each one for more than an hour. I expect it was nearly four hours by the time I got back to the camp. It was turning off dusk, I remember, and the herders were working their bands back toward the bedground. The cook had come in but he hadn’t been back very long for his horse was still saddled.”

“ Was he riding a white horse? ” Kennedy interrupted.

“ That’s what he was,” Dickson said.

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“A big horse that would wear number two shoes?” the old trapper inquired.

“It was a sizeable horse, for a fact,” the ranger agreed. “And would likely take a number two shoe — though I didn’t notice for sure. But how did you know?”

Kennedy told him of the signs he had found round the camp where the stranger had stayed a night in the gulch. Then his mind reverted to another point — to the fact that he had been unable to find a single boot print around that scene.

“Just a minute,” he said. “Did that cook ever wear shoe-pacs or moccasins?”

“He had on a pair of pacs that day,” Dickson testified. “Ankle-height moccasins; that’s what he wore.”

“He’s the man,” Kennedy stated. “You don’t happen to know his whereabouts a day or two before you rode into that spring-gun? Was he missing from camp?”

“The camp was closed,” Dickson said. “That was ten days after the date that sheep can stay on the Forest. They’d worked their

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bands down to the ranch. All three of the men went with the sheep."

"One of 'em came back," Kennedy asserted. "Or cut across after they'd started and overhauled them next day. What sort of a looker is this camp cook? Maybe the boys would recognize his description."

"He's a queer-built little runt," Dickson said. "With dumpy legs and a head too big for his body. He's ——"

"Bantam Neil!" both boys announced.

"Likely," Kennedy said. "Our old fur-thief friend from the Santag. It's natural enough for the Neils to come back to this country when they ducked out of the Flint Hills. Two Buttes, where they hung out before, is clear at the far end of the State, so no one would know them up here. And now their name's Cole. Who's the third man at the camp?"

"A cousin," Dickson informed. "I don't recall his name."

"It don't matter," Kennedy said. "He's one of the breed so he wouldn't hamper their

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actions. If it's the Neils they'd naturally want you out of the country so you wouldn't run onto them and have them picked up on that robbery charge. Likely they knew you'd been having a hard time paying up and figured a few added troubles would finish you off. But it would have been simpler for them to have quit that sheep-herding job and moved on themselves. It's not like the Neils to care much about holding onto a job. There must be some reason why they want to stay with that job — and dollars are the only reasons the Neils recognize. To-morrow we'll head for the sheep ranch and maybe we'll find what that reason is."

The following day they rode off along the foot of the hills and stopped overnight at a ranch a little more than halfway to their destination. The second morning they crossed over the outcropping spur that was thrust out from the main chain of hills and reached far out in the flats, reaching the sheep ranch at noon.

There were several men turned up at the

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cookhouse for the noon meal but there was none who resembled the Neils. The sheepman nodded when Kennedy casually inquired if the Cole boys had worked for him.

“Last year,” he said. “But they quit in the fall.”

His eyes flickered away from Kennedy’s and the old trapper did not pursue the subject.

Off toward the base of the hills a few homestead cabins showed in the distance and when the three friends rode away from the sheep ranch Kennedy headed for one of these. A man was stringing fence wire on a line of new posts as they rode up.

“Taking up a pasture homestead?” Kennedy asked.

“Mine’s over there,” the man answered, pointing to another cabin a mile or more away. “This belongs to one of the Coles. The other one filed on the next section to this. I’m getting paid to build fence on their filings.”

“Where are the Coles hanging out now?” Kennedy asked.

“Back in the hills,” the man informed.

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“They wintered up there, figuring to run out some marten traps. Likely they’re head-quartering at the summer sheep camp.”

“That’s the final link,” Kennedy stated after they had left the homestead. “Now we know the reason why the Neils were anxious to stay and tried to drive you out instead of slipping away themselves when they heard you were in the country. A man can file on a square mile of grazing land now under the new Pasture Act. Both the Neils filed and the owner of the sheep ranch is likely paying for their improvements. Then when they prove up he’ll give them a couple of thousand apiece for their land. That makes it soft for the Neils. They can herd sheep in the summers and poach on the Forest of winters while their prove-up work is being done by some one else, then get a nice piece of money at the end of three years without having worked for it. That’s why that sheepman wouldn’t give us any information. He wants to see them stay long enough to prove up and deed their land over to him.”

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The day after their return to the ranch the three of them set forth again, this time on foot, each packing a single blanket and food for three days. They climbed the length of Bobcat Canyon and struck the solid timber above the rims. Here the heavy drifts were sheltered and a four-foot layer of old snow stretched before them in the timber.

"We won't set foot on dry ground again," Kennedy said. "Not till we get back. These drifts will stay on till midsummer and it will be some time in May before a man could put a horse through as far as the sheep camp."

Hour after hour they toiled on across the snow. Spring thaws had settled and packed the drifts and their feet sank but a few inches below the surface. This dead-white expanse seemed another world apart from the one they had just left, for there was no snow below the rims. Once again they were on the trail of the Neils.

"It seems like old times," Wally said. "Our tracking down this Neil outfit."

"Sort of carries you back to the time we

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raided their camp in the Santag," Kennedy agreed.

They had made a late start and night shut down over the hills when they had covered half the distance.

"I'll show you how to lay out overnight in the snow when it's not too cold," Kennedy said. "It's a better way than trying to mess round with a fire on top of four feet of snow."

He inspected several windfall jams that rose above the snow till he found one where two huge logs lay side by side and some two feet apart. They covered the snow between the logs with a six-inch layer of spruce bows and lined the inner sides of the logs, then lay down in single file the length of this nest, each one rolled in his single blanket. In the morning they held on across the drifts but stopped when within a mile of the sheep camp and waited for darkness. An hour after sunset they reached the edge of the timber and peered at the little cabin that stood a hundred yards out in an open basin. The door was closed but a light gleamed brightly from the single window.

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“You stay here in the edge of the timber,” Kennedy instructed Bob. “Then if one of ’em gets out and makes a break for the trees you can head him off. Wally and I will slip up to the cabin. If we can reach the door we’ll throw it open and hold them up before they know what’s happened. If they’ve got a dog and he gives the alarm we’ll make a run for it and try to reach the door by the time they open it to see what’s going on outside.”

Bob watched the two figures move across the snow toward the cabin. Then he saw Kennedy’s head in silhouette against the light of the window as the old trapper peered inside. The head was withdrawn and he could see only the dark wall of the cabin with the single beam of light from the window. Suddenly there were two gleams of light, for the door had swung open and Kennedy’s shape was outlined in black against the yellow light from the inside of the doorway. He heard Kennedy’s voice.

“Steady!” it ordered. “Sit tight! Just

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stay right in your chair. We'll excuse you for not rising to greet us."

Kennedy passed through the door, followed by Wally. In another instant Bob would have started out across the open to join them but his spine suddenly tingled at the sound of a slight cough behind him. He peered round the tree against which he had been standing. A few moments past his eyes had been adjusted to the night and objects had been discernible at fifty yards across the white snowy floor of the timber; but he had been peering toward the light from the cabin and now he blinked without seeing and the forest behind him seemed but a black wall. He heard the crunch of a foot on the snow. His pupils readjusted themselves to the darkness and he made out a shape moving toward him under the trees. The man breathed heavily as he came forward, his eyes trained on the open door of the cabin. The murmur of voices had reached his ears and he knew that all was not well. He reached the edge of the timber and stood by a tree not six feet from the boy. His body was concealed

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by the trunk but the barrel of his rifle showed beyond it, half raised toward the cabin. Bob raised his own rifle to cover the man when he should step from behind the sheltering trunk. There was a lessening of the light from the cabin and Wally's figure was sharply outlined against the yellow gleam of the doorway.

"Come on, Bob, we've got one of 'em," he called. "It's Bantam Neil for a fact."

The man behind the tree swung his gun into line. Bob dropped his own gun and with a single step he seized the rifle barrel that was trained on Wally.

"Drop it!" he ordered.

The man grunted with surprise, took one backward step, and the rifle slipped from his fingers. Bob aimed a blow at his head but a low-hanging limb obstructed the sweep of the gun and wrenched it aside and the sight cut a gash in his palm as it slipped through his hands. The boy leaped for the man and crashed down on top of him as his enemy tripped and toppled backwards into the snow.

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The man was far more powerful than the boy and his hands sought Bob's throat. Even in the dim light under the trees Bob recognized the man as Reese Neil. Twice he wrenched away from the clutching fingers and swung his fist solidly into Neil's face. Then the hands clamped down and shut off his wind. Neither combatant heard the crunch of boots on snow as Wally leaped across the open space from the cabin. Neil squirmed on top and raised to his knees, throwing every ounce of his strength into the pressure of his hands. The boy seized his wrists but could not break the deadly hold that was shutting off his breath. Neil's fingers suddenly relaxed. The air rushed back to Bob's lungs as Neil sprawled limply across him. Wally had struck the man full on the point of the jaw as he knelt over Bob in the snow.

The two boys marched Neil to the cabin where Kennedy guarded his partner.

"Here we are — all gathered together again," Kennedy said. "Just like that time down in the Santag Swamp."

“What right have you got holding us up?” Neil demanded.

“You’re going in to answer a charge of setting a spring-gun and killing elk for their teeth,” Kennedy stated.

“You couldn’t prove it in a thousand years and you know it,” Neil stated.

“I don’t need to,” Kennedy answered. “You’ll likely confess.”

Neil opened his mouth to deny any such possibility but the old trapper waved him to silence.

“Or maybe you won’t,” he went on. “The choice lays with you. You can either tell them of your own free will and accord all about how you stole Bob’s gun and set it on the pack trail and about killing elk for their teeth or you can go back to the Flint Hills to face that robbery charge — which will likely send you up for ten years. It’s all one with me, so you take your choice. I see by that pile of beaver pelts that you’ve been poaching beaver on the Forest Reserve. As long as you’ve changed your name to Cole it’s certain you’ve made false

affidavit in filing application for a homestead. Why, you've planted your foot in it so many different ways that you could be arrested by a game warden, a ranger, a U. S. Marshal or the sheriff."

"But how are you going to arrest me?" Neil demanded. "You're not any of those. You'll have to have a warrant sworn out and send an officer out for me. You can't arrest me yourself."

"As far as the law reads you're right," Kennedy admitted. "But according to facts I'm going to take you along. You can stand on your rights and refuse to go — and if you do I'll drag you in by the heels. So you better make up your mind about which way you'll travel. You Neils have come to the end of your rope."

A week later the three friends sat before the home cabin in the falling dusk.

"The only thing that's fretting you now is that overdue payment," Kennedy said. "When you get ready to meet it you can pay it to me. I took over the place from Lawton,

subject to your contract. You're paying me a good rate of interest so I'm in no hurry. Another two or three years of hard work and you'll be in the clear."

A buckboard rattled up the lane. It was piled high with luggage. The McIntyre boys too had reached their goal and were off to make their start in the city. They had cut across for a parting word with old friends on the way to the train.

"I guess all of us have found what we wanted the most," Bob said, as the rattle of the buckboard died out in the distance. He gazed off at the towering ranges outlined against the sky. The breeze carried the sharp tang of spruce and lodgepole, the acrid spice of sage, and he shook his head as he thought of trading it for the reek of steaming pavements. A range bull bawled hoarsely and a coyote lifted his voice from the flank of the hills.

"I hope they'll like it, where they're going," Bob said. "But me — well, I'm satisfied with this."

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